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THE DIARY OF A SLAVE

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LONDON
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & CO., LTD.

**MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY FURNELL AND SONS, LTD.
FAULTON (SOMERSET) AND LONDON**

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THE DIARY OF A SLAVE

CHAPTER I

BLOOD FLOWS IN THE HILLS

Yes—I have been a slave.

For some time, amidst the wilds of Turkonania, I was the unwilling property of a fiend in human shape—a man in whose veins coursed the worst traits of Mongol, Tartar and Arab. I was beaten, half-starved threatened with death on a score of occasions, and daily lived in an atmosphere of murder and devilish debauchery. Yet—were I to commence this narrative with a confession, I should admit that I am finding the greatest thrill of what has been a very mercurial existence here in Europe maintaining myself.

Please do not assume that I am a fly-by-night, or one of those fluttering opportunists with a record of startling affluence one week and galling penury the next. I think I am quite normal. I operate on an overdraft which is small, but aggravatingly persistent; otherwise, I have an assured position, and one which provides sufficient of the creature comforts of this world.

I suppose it is my appreciation of environment which gives me this thrill in living, and causes me to see in the wonderful kaleidoscope which is Europe, a mighty and pulsating drama.

I am the scion of those Khans who came from beyond the frontiers of Northern India. I am from a people who sometimes have to tighten the cords of their loose-fitting trousers, but never go hungry in the accepted sense of the word. They are agriculturalists, and men who live on the land and lead a life which has a tenor of its own. True, there is strife, but not the strife which decimates a nation. A score or so are bowled over; a feud is settled, and—all is peace until the next time.

Yet withal, there is a certain security.

Here in Europe there are millions whose livelihood depends upon the whim of an employer. There are millions who, in order to achieve some element of security, have to subscribe through their manifold taxes to anti-gas measures, fleets of fast fighting aeroplanes, enormous death-dealing battleships, and an enlarged Whitehall where are maintained the card-indexes whereby harassed Ministers keep track of their "Accords" and the treaties which descend upon a bewildered people like confetti strewn by a mordant Shaitan.

And the English see little drama in this amazing maelstrom of distrust and suspicion.

Perhaps that is why I am writing of such an insignificant trifle as slavery, and of my own not so very remarkable adventures.

Having thus given vent to my feeling of diffidence, and detracted, perchance, from that atmosphere of simmering expectation and burning anticipation which, I am assured, should be part and parcel of one's preamble, I will tell you my story.

To all things there is a beginning.

I was brought up amidst the perfumes, the fragrance and the insidious bouquet of the women's quarters—in apartments of cool alcoves carpeted with rich Eastern rugs and furnished with divans and cushions covered with the costliest of Teheran silks. My father maintained a considerable ménage.

My early years were spent mainly behind the purdah, and—rather extraordinary years they were when looked at from the detached angle of a Diesel-engined omnibus.

There was my grandmother—a striking, hook-nosed woman almost six feet tall. She had come from Kabul, and she would tell me tales which thrilled my blood. She would recount how, during the fighting with the British troops under General Roberts in the Afghan capital, she, too, seized a sword and wielded it to some purpose. Gazing into her still hawk-like eyes, and watching her nostrils dilate as she entered into the spirit of reminiscence, I could well believe her. She told me also how in the many tribal affrays, she had often sighted a long-barrelled jezail and, notwithstanding the tremendous “kick” which these weapons impart, had brought down her man.

Curious tales to associate with the fragrance and the voluptuous extravagances of the women's apartments of an Eastern Khan!

I was to learn that even behind the purdah, where all should be harmony, and sweet listless luxury, there was much to provide that all-essential contrast which women the world over consider vital to their existence.

My father had two wives. By the laws of the clans, he could have four, but I was spared that infliction. My mother was the elder one of the two.

The second wife was apt, quite frequently, to gaze upon me with a jaundiced eye, if I was picked out for some small mark of favour—even a dish of special sweetmeats could sometimes provoke a scowl—and she had little use for me at all. She had had the misfortune to remain without an issue for a long time, during which time, of course, all my father's "sweetness" was bestowed on me. During that time, too, attempts were made on my life, and she spent her days in inventing spells and in smuggling in so-called "love potions" upon which she expended many rupees.

Frequently also, in a further effort to overcome her disability, she would indulge in the rigours of the Forty Days' Fast, when she would refuse all food and during the hours of daylight would allow no liquid to pass her lips. Just before dawn she would partake of a little water. After sundown she would drink a little warm milk. Otherwise her fast was utter and complete. With the passing of each day so did her temper and touchiness increase and, as can be imagined, the women's apartments were not a happy place when these rigorous rites were being prosecuted.

It was with feelings of considerable joy that I was at length informed that I was old enough to emerge from this world of petty bickering, and to seek the company of the men. Not long after this—or so it seems from this distance of time—something occurred

which was to have great bearing upon my life. I was eleven years of age, and as is so frequently the case, the actual incident was trivial.

My father decided to visit Peshawar. I forget what business took us to Peshawar, but I know that when it was completed my father decided to journey on to Chakdara, on the Swat River, to interview a personage there. Chakdara is, of course, British territory, and it is manned by troops from the Malakand. It consists of little more than a fort built on the side of a comparatively low hill, and a number of posts which dominate the surrounding countryside. It was while here that my father decided to buy me a rifle.

To the eastward of Chakdara, and barely in tribal territory, there is the large village of Thana. Why, I could not understand, and I still fail to understand to this day, but in Thana, and under the very noses of the British, there is a large Pathan rifle factory where are made the most astonishingly correct replicas of the British Lee-Enfield. My father was anxious for me to have such a rifle, but in my case it could not just be ordered. My arms were not long enough to encompass the long butt ordinarily attached to these weapons.

A hoary-headed blacksmith measured me for the rifle, and I was elated, for the possession of such a weapon is the dearest wish of all males across the Northern border. The rifle was delivered some weeks later, and I remember with what loving care I tended it. The craftsman who made it kept so carefully to pattern that the sole of the butt bore the

imprint "V.R. 1910." It was not until many years afterwards that I appreciated the incongruity. However, it was a splendid rifle, and as soon as I had mastered the mystery of the sighting and ranging, I became an adept. I accomplished this with the expenditure of a remarkably small amount of ammunition. This had to be, for though Lee-Enfield rifles or replicas can be purchased provided one has the money, .303 ammunition is not so easily come by. As to the methods by which it is secured, perhaps the less said about these the better.

An insignificant matter, this acquisition of a rifle, but it must have been a portent. My cousins were not pleased, and the eldest became almost curt and morose. Always in the back of his mind, and in that of his mother, my aunt, was the thought that perhaps my father (as was within his rights) would nominate him as his heir and dispossess me. Matters thus dragged on for a long time, the atmosphere being very strained, and my lot just as uncomfortable as two agile-minded young men could make it. Then came the hand of Fate.

For many generations there had been bad feeling between my family and that of a neighbouring Khan whose lands extended to the valleys five miles away. Blood had been spilt by the rival clans, but for a number of years the feud had been allowed to simmer. We had hopes that it would disappear altogether with the passage of time, and my father had given orders that nothing must be done at any time which would be likely further to estrange the feelings between the two families.

However, lingering in our minds, and in the minds of those across the hills, was the thought that we had had the last shot. In the last encounter it was an uncle of mine who had disposed of his enemy, and the balance of blood was on our side.

Would it be allowed to remain so?

Sometimes we wondered.

The answer came one hot sultry afternoon just before the break of the rains—a day when tempers are frayed and the heat seems almost insupportable.

I know that I was resting in the shade, drinking the juice of the lime and fanning myself with an ornate fan, when the news was brought.

My cousin, riding out to some distant pasture where he had gone to examine the state of a small spring which had shown signs of drying up, had been shot—dead.

The servant who brought the news had caught his wildly careering pony, and had galloped back at all speed with the grim tidings. There was no need to ask if there had been an accident—no need to ask how death had been brought upon our house. Instinctively we knew. The feud had broken out again.

I can see my father's face now, ravaged with anger and with shame. For a few moments he stormed, calling down the most frightful curses upon those who had done this deed. Then he fell silent, and he gazed at me in a curious way.

I knew, from the manner of his ravings, that he was uncertain as to which of the house of Gul Mahamed—though I hide the real name for obvious

reasons—had levelled the rifle at the man, but I had no need to be told.

Of Gul Mahamed's many sons there was one aged about twenty who was loud in his disparagement of my father. He was churlish and introspective, and it was well-known among those who roamed the mountains that he cherished the memory of the feud. He was fully acquainted with all the hoary details which led to its inception—an ancient boundary dispute.

I knew who had done this thing, and my heart was aflame with a burning merciless hatred against one who had delved into the muck-heap of the past and had allowed an inbred morbidness again to plunge two families into conflict.

The spot where the murder had been committed had been well selected for the purposes of crime, but here again the circumstances pointed unerringly to one to whom motive and accomplishment meant everything. They indicated a not very robust and one-track mind.

This son of Gul Mahamed had chosen the one place where he could be certain that a single shot would have its effect. Standing there before my father, I could imagine him envisaging the scene. That much he had in mind—the killing, and—little else.

The servant accompanying my cousin had ridden at speed. The murder had taken place about three o'clock in the afternoon, and there still remained many hours of daylight.

My relative slayer had many miles to travel before

he could reckon on the security of his own valleys, and I could sense the doubt then torturing his mind. He had seen the servant depart to convey the ill-tidings, and he would know that men would soon be hot on his trail. Quickly I put myself in his shoes, and I followed in my mind the rugged mountain paths to which he would naturally gravitate.

I stood there irresolute, these matters heavy on my mind.

I looked up, and again caught that curious expression in my father's eyes.

I had but recently turned twelve years of age, but I knew.

Instinctively my father had turned to me instead of towards others. He did not put his thoughts into words, but there was no need.

I said nothing, but turned on my heel. Then, racing for my beloved rifle, I caught up several clips of ammunition, and slipped away unseen. In the turmoil which was then raging, this was no difficult matter. It was facilitated, too, by the fact that all movement was concentrated in the direction where lay the murdered man's body. Knowing something of the slayer, I directed my steps in the opposite direction and made for a deep and tortuous ravine where instinct told me I would eventually face this man.

I moved with the inbred cunning of the tribesman. Never once was I silhouetted against the skyline, and never did I cross an exposed piece of ground. Naturally, and without hesitation, I worked cautiously along each avenue of dead out-crop, and I was

satisfied that not even a mountain sheep would have observed my passing.

I reached my objective after an hour and a half of arduous going, and I selected a small shelf in the ravine side which commanded a wide field of view.

The sun told me that it was then well past five o'clock, and doubts assailed me. I had taken a great deal for granted. I had acted on impulse, and it was suddenly borne in upon me that I was a mere stripling pitting himself against a man. The physical element in this did not worry me, but had I assumed too much in under-rating the mental capacities of my antagonist? There was my father and the men with him, all of whom had seen fighting in their day, and all well qualified as strategists. Yet not one had seen fit to scour the terrain which I had selected. Clutching my rifle in my hard-won observation post, I began to feel a trifle foolish.

An hour passed and there was no sign of movement, and this feeling of embarrassment became intensified. I wondered what I would say when I returned. I wondered, also, how my explanations would be received. I had a picture of the murdered man, caustic and unbelieving, suggesting by innuendo, if not by words, that I had taken the opportunity to slip away and hide.

Another half an hour slipped by, and I was fast becoming convinced of my ineptitude, when I heard a stone, obviously dislodged by some unseen force, strike a rock on the far side of the ravine. The sound came from some hundred yards to my left, and the

ravine at that spot was perhaps three hundred yards across.

It was but a tiny stone which had been sent down the khudside, but in that rarefied atmosphere my keen mountain ears heard it distinctly.

I strained my eyes to discover the cause of this suspicious sound, but I could discern nothing. If it was some straying goat, it was grazing in the shelter of some rocks. If it was a man, he, too, was aware that a stone had been dislodged, and was taking every precaution.

In my youthfulness and eagerness, I leaned over my rocky shelf the better to observe the ground below me, when I, too, sent a stone ricocheting into the depths. I scrambled back quickly, but I was almost too late. There was a tearing whine in the air and something hit the rock behind me with a dull thud. The projectile had come unpleasantly close to my ear, but I had heard its passage through the air, and that was something. It made a curious moaning noise—oo-oo—and I knew that it was not a bullet. The man who had taken a snapshot at me was not firing a rifle, but an old-fashioned jezail, into which he had to pour black gunpowder from a horn. Judging by the sound of the thing which had nearly flicked my ear, I surmised that on top of the gunpowder this gentleman was ramming down chopped telegraph wire, or nails.

I took heart, for unless this man had a second weapon, which was exceedingly unlikely, there would have to be an interval before the arrival of a second missile. Even as I scrambled back under cover,

this marksman would be fumbling with his powder horn and doing doughty work with a ramrod.

Judging the spot from which I imagined the shot had been fired, I let off three rounds in rapid succession. That left me one in the chamber, and one in the magazine, besides the additional clips in my pockets. I had the satisfaction of seeing a momentary flash of burnished steel. I judged that one of my bullets had struck a stone inconveniently near my target, and that rock splinters had occasioned an untimely gesture.

Some fifteen minutes passed without any further firing. This other, aware of my superior armament, was waiting for me to make some incautious movement.

Gently, I removed my turban, and allowed it to protrude an inch over the ledge in the hope of drawing fire, but this marksman was canny, and disdained the invitation.

There was a further interval of inactivity, and my youthful patience wore thin under the strain. I resolved to wriggle from my waistcoat and, as my turban had failed, to use this as a decoy. I must have been incautious, and I must have revealed more than I knew, for suddenly there was a searing pain along my left shoulder. The surprise and the pain caused me to cry out, and though I bit my lips immediately afterwards I was sufficiently chagrined. That cry had been heard, and Gul Mahamed's son would know that he had hit me.

Stifling my pain, I lay inert—I know not how long. I had to remain there on my rocky shelf, waiting.

The light was fast going, and I was gradually losing grip of my self-control when I saw a figure, cautiously creeping. Gul Mahamed junior, in the belief that he had killed me, was spying out the land.

Then it was that I thanked Allah for my father's foresight and generosity. Had he not visited Peshawar we should never have gone to Thana. Had we never been there, I should not have possessed a rifle whose stock fitted my shoulder so snugly. Ignoring the pain which every movement imparted, I aligned my rifle in a cleft in the rock. My left arm was useless, and a support was necessary. I fired, and my house was avenged and a murderer had left the countryside.

I remember gazing stupidly along the barrel of my tribal Lee-Enfield and wondering, in a dim, dazed kind of way, what all this was about. I could see a form across the ravine, which must have been the murderer. Then, I believe, I fainted.

CHAPTER II

A JOB

WHEN I came to my senses, I was home. I had been found in the ravine by my father's men, and had been removed in a roughly constructed litter.

The piece of wire which had entered my shoulder had splintered the bone, and I had high fever. My father, though overwhelmed by the loss of our relative still retained sufficient of his modern ideas to refuse to allow a local hakim to maltreat my wound. He had men foment my shoulder with water which had been previously boiled, and after the interment of the murdered man, had me transported with all haste to Peshawar where I received the skilled attention of an English doctor.

Thus, for the second time I saw this marvellous city—I still think it so even after this space of time—and in the weeks of my convalescence, during which I had frequently to see my medical attendant, I saw much which opened my eyes.

As a Moslem youth of some standing, I had already received a considerable education, for my father had imported a succession of Moslem tutors. Moslem thought invariably turns to books and learning, and I had not been an inattentive pupil. Nevertheless, this sojourn in Peshawar awakened me to my deficiencies. I saw the students attending the college

there, and my blood was fired. I resolved that when I should return home I would prevail upon my father to allow me to extend my education.

In this I encountered surprisingly few difficulties. Because of what had transpired in the ravine my father was willing that I should have my heart's desire. In this he was seconded by other Elders, because they were jealous of "a mere boy's performance" and saw a personal affront in my disposal of Gul Mahamed's son, and was painfully anxious that I should not further ingratiate myself with my father. They saw in my desire to go to Peshawar a means of ridding themselves of a "disturbing" factor.

In the end I did not go to Peshawar, but to Lahore, the university city of the Punjab, where my father had a friend into whose house I was accepted.

I spent several happy years in Lahore, and these were rendered the more pleasant because of the transfer of my Peshawar doctor. He occupied a commodious bungalow in Lawrence Road, and chancing to meet him on the Mall when he was out riding, he invited me to call. I did so, and many times subsequently. It was in this friendship, I think, that I was first fired with the idea of becoming a scientist.

I succeeded in scraping through an English education and returned north and beyond the border, still with the thoughts of scientific work in my mind. I was diffident in approaching my father in the matter, because I entertained no light plans. I was determined that if I were to become a scientist, I would be one

with unimpeachable qualifications, and this would entail a lengthy visit to Europe—an unheard of proposition for the son of a Khan.

Here, my cousin unconsciously assisted me. My father was beginning to show his age, and he took less trouble than previously to hide his affection for me. When, greatly daring, I eventually spoke of my ambitions, he demurred, but my cousin's promptings helped to turn the scale—these, and the knowledge that the house of Gul Mahamed daily cursed my name and had designs upon my person.

In the end I departed, and sailed from Bombay on a P. and O. steamer. I, who had seen nothing bigger than a rowing boat on the Ravi, at Lahore, thought her a wonderful vessel, quite oblivious of the fact that she was then fast approaching her allotted span of usefulness on the mail run and was soon to be sold to the Chinese.

Port Said left me cold, and Marseilles—my first real sight of Europe, I considered unspeakably foul and depressing. It was cold, and it rained, and I was glad when the steamer turned southward once again for Gibraltar.

Never shall I forget the thrill which the lights of England gave me as we steamed along the Channel, and never shall I eradicate the acute depression which assailed me as, in a continuous downpour, and in a mean little train not half as comfortable or as commodious as those on which I had travelled to Bombay, I made that singularly uninspiring journey from Tilbury to Fenchurch Street. Why I have often asked myself—and others—should the

principal gateway to England be through the worst mud flats of the country and the back-yards and the indecorously displayed washing of some of the most soul-numbing districts of the Metropolis?

In the gloomy, smoke-begrimed cavern which is Fenchurch Street, I was mobbed by a press of men in red ties. They fought for my luggage, and bore it away, and I entertained thoughts of returning to my native hills where there is at least a ceremonial attached to theft and chicanery. I imagined, in my ignorance, that these gentlemen were Communists—of whom I had read in the newspapers. Since, I have discovered that porters, especially those on the Southern Railway, have a weakness for ties which are dangerously symbolical.

Weakly I followed my belongings which were piled upon a machine which I have now learned contemptuously to disdain as a "one-lunger." A man in a peaked cap and a variety of overcoats ejaculated: "Where?" Tremulously I answered, "Gower Street," and this incredibly aged vehicle panted its way through the lesser canyons of the City amidst a frightening, overwhelming maelstrom of traffic which appalled me.

That ride I considered the most perilous in my life. The noise was hideous and my jehu alarmingly complacent. I was so shattered that I paid him what he demanded when he decanted me in the comparative quiet of the backwaters of Bloomsbury.

Of my stay in London I need not speak, for it was brief. Soon I was translated to the tranquillity of a provincial city where, for two and a half years

I pursued my scientific studies. My father was generous, and I received each month more than a generous allowance.

Then, when all seemed set fair, there came a thunderbolt in the form of a cable informing me that my father had died. Later there came a letter from my relations, telling me that my father's financial state was not what we had all supposed, and that my allowance must cease forthwith.

I did not, of course, believe the story of penury which these relations painted, but I *had* to believe that part of their letter which spoke of the cessation of funds. I knew that there could be no appeal from this ukase, and I found myself in a sorry quandary. Here I was in a foreign country where credit is extremely limited except for the favoured few, I was far short of obtaining the degrees which I coveted.

Fortunate I was in that my allowance had been generous, for I had sufficient in the bank for my immediate needs. There could be, however, no question of my becoming a scientist. That dream faded into the dim and remote distance. Before very long I should want a job, and that badly.

Perhaps during my stay in the town where I then was I had imbued some of the characteristics of its people, for, faced with the necessity of acquiring money, I packed up with all speed and made for London.

While there I was fortunate in that I met a man who knew a man. It was really something like that—these things usually are. In any event, the man

who knew my man, knew in his turn, the ruler of a small Indian State. He rather believed that this Raja was anxious to acquire a private secretary. At any rate, he would find out.

Rather a hopeless proposition this, as many will have had the misfortune to realise. Here was I, and here was a problematical job. And, the job seemed so many times removed. Frankly, I dismissed the matter from my mind.

In the meantime I scoured London for work. I had an idea that I could write authoritatively on India, and I forced my presence upon innumerable editors with this object in view. I found that every Indian student in London laboured under the same delusion. The ranks of these writers, and would-be writers, was swelled by a host of retired Indian Civil Servants and by a horde, almost as large, who had at one time touched at Bombay or Colombo and were, therefore, soaked in their subject.

The editors of Fleet Street I found to be urbane and polite. They were even interested until I mentioned the subject of India. Then—— Well, you perhaps know how a man can yawn without gaping his mouth.

They were sorry, but—— If I had only ridden from India on a bicycle——! One man asked me in all seriousness whether I wouldn't like to be a new Messiah. He assured me that it would be good for a couple of columns. I rejected the role.

Another asked me to write on the ill-treatment accorded to the women in the East. When I assured him that the women there, even with and

notwithstanding the purdah, had much the same dominance that they have in the households of other countries, he frankly did not believe me. I could see his reactions—it wasn't "copy," anyway.

I did, however, succeed in breaking out into print. I was in the editorial sanctum of one of the great newspapers when a harassed man rushed in in his shirt-sleeves. He had two pictures in his hand. Both purported to be the photograph of an Indian dignitary. One was, and the other wasn't. There had been a mix-up in the filing, and a picture was required to adorn a paragraph. I was able to suggest a caption of six words for the correct portrait. Next morning I had the satisfaction of seeing them in the newspaper—every one of them.

It was the first and only time that I have been printed verbatim. I wished that some of my elation could be transferred to my drooping bank balance.

Six weeks passed thus, and then I had another cable. This was somewhat more pleasant than the other.

It seemed that after all there was a Raja who required a private secretary and that I had been deemed suitable for the post. If I was prepared to pay my own passage out, I could take up my duties as soon as I liked on a salary of eight hundred rupees a month.

This seemed like the manna of the Old Testament. The only difficulty was that of the passage. I went into ways and means and found that if I could be persuaded to travel third class to Bombay

I could reckon to end up in the State with a little over £150 in the bank. I decided to risk it, and cabled.

It is not my purpose to be critical of the administration of Indian States. Some of them are models. Others, quite obviously, are not. Perhaps I was unfortunate. I have, for that reason, refrained from defining the State to which I went as a not very shining light, and I will say no more than that verification of many of the incidents which I may mention in passing is to be found in the files of the Secretariat of the Government of India.

I was well received by the Raja, and I found that in addition to my salary I was provided with excellent quarters, servants and an adequacy of provisions. It cost me nothing to live, and I used to lie awake at nights multiplying my eight hundred rupees salary until it grew into incredible amounts and I fell asleep.

I think I have mentioned that it was quite a small State—small as Indian States go, that is—and I found that my duties went beyond those usually encompassed by a private secretary. This I did not mind, but plenty of difficulties were put in my path. It did not take me long to discover that instead of one, I had two masters, and that always makes for trouble.

The Raja had a brother, and the brother was heir. The latter had conceived the idea that it would be pleasant were the ruler to die of delirium tremens. The Raja seemed to find the prospect alluring also, and when I arrived he had already

made several interesting new discoveries amidst the world's fauna.

The Raja would order one thing at night, and forget that he had so ordered by the morning. Not only would he forget, but he would deny that he had ever done so, and upbraid me for being the something son of a creature completely *be-akul*.

It was no uncommon thing to be dragged out of bed at three o'clock in the morning, and to be informed by a breathless peon that His Highness desired to see me immediately.

Never once did these nocturnal summonses result in anything tangible, for it was inevitable that when I at length ushered myself into the Raja's sleeping apartments he would be snoring soundly. Next morning he would have no knowledge of the summons. On the rare occasions when he did admit that he had sent for me, he nonchalantly explained that he could not recall the reason.

I mentioned the fact that I had two masters. This was made apparent to me when I discovered that the Raja's brother, in addition to being the heir, was also Minister of Finance.

His Highness, as ruler, would command a thing. The brother, as Minister of Finance, would—in English parlance—tell me go and chase myself.

In addition to my other duties I was a sort of Quarter-master-General and Adjutant-General of the State army. This was composed of some two hundred men attired in ancient uniforms of striking hues and whose duty it was to protect the presence of His Highness and to provide an element of martial

splendour by much marching and counter-marching in the forecourt of the palace.

The General Officer Commanding this force was a grizzled old Subedar who had seen service in the regular Indian Army, and his opinion of his present command was broadcast every day from the back of an aged charger. It was not very flattering, and when I had been in the State for a little more than three months and I had discovered that the old man was not one of those in the inner circle of palace intrigue, I asked him the reason.

His lips twisted into a wry smile when I put the question.

"The men are all right," he answered defensively.

"What is it then, Sarkanda Singh, equipment?" for I had seen for myself many deficiencies and a growing slovenliness among the soldiery.

He shrugged his shoulders. "The equipment is good enough—there is no one to fight." The Subedar was being evasive.

"But," I expostulated, "there must be something."

He looked up and stared me straight in the eye.

"You are a newcomer," he said. "It is said that you are down on the salary list for rupees eight hundred per month."

I nodded.

"Would your Honour consider it an impertinence were I to ask how often you have drawn your salary?"

I started.

At the conclusion of my first month's labours I had confidently expected a chit on the Treasury for my eight hundred rupees. As it had not been forthcoming, I had resolved to wait, for I knew sufficient of Indian State management to realise that the last thing a successful and popular servant does is to ask for money. I consoled myself with the thought that perhaps the salary was paid well in arrears—no very remarkable thing in the East, and I had not allowed the subject to trouble my thoughts.

But—this question was pertinent.

"No," I stammered. "I have not yet received any pay."

"You have your wife with you. She receives food and shelter from the State, as do you?"

Again I nodded.

"Well, the wives of the men do not. They are away in the villages from which the men were impressed, and they cry for food."

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"You mean that the men have been without their pay?"

Sarkanda Singh bowed his head.

"For nine months," he said dismally, "and little can be done with men whose womenfolk send messages such as I have seen."

I made my way to my quarters, and thought hard. I could see the signs of insipient mutiny in what Sarkanda Singh had told me, and the reason for the unrest in banishing my own qualms.

Six weeks later the trouble came. The army fell in, and when harangued by the forceful Subedar

from the eminence of his charger, just stood their ground woodedly.

In vain he chided, cursed and cajoled them in turn, but they refused to perform their toy-soldier evolutions. In the end they about turned in a body and marched off to their barracks, complete with arms.

His Highness was informed—this was my unpleasant duty—and I thought he was going to break a blood vessel. He stormed and raged, and finally broke out into a violent trembling.

For the first time the full purport of the affair had sunk into his drink-sodden brain, and with the perversity of the alcoholic he persisted in seeing much more than the reality.

Here was he a ruler, in his palace. Nearby, fully armed, and in barracks, was a mutinous and licentious army. This was red revolution, and his life was imperilled.

He turned upon me, gazed at me savagely, and snarled.

“Why are you not doing something?” he screamed.

I endeavoured to temporise.

“But, your Highness, the men——”

“You would side with the men—these mutinous dogs. Anything might happen. I must have a fast horse. . . .”

It was with difficulty that I could restrain a smile, for the thought of the Raja's unfortunate rabble running amuck was ludicrous. The men had been forced into mutiny by their women. Without the diatribes from the villages not one would have had the courage to have faced that fiery-tongued Subedar.

His Highness paced up and down his State apartments, ordering, countermanding, fulminating and weeping.

In the end he rushed to a telephone, and demanded His Excellency the Governor in the nearest British territory. The connection took time as he had to speak over several hundred miles of wire, and as he waited he danced in his fury around the instrument. His gambols were circumscribed by the length of the telephone cord, and he resembled nothing more than a performing bear chained to the wall.

When he at length got through it was obvious from his conversation that the official whose aid he sought was not immediately available, but this did not prevent him from pouring out an astonishing tale of murder, rapine, and sudden death.

His piece finished, His Highness retired to the inner fastnesses of his palace and was not seen for thirty-six hours, by which time a British subaltern with twenty Gurkhas arrived from the beyond.

I interviewed the officer—he was little more than a youth—and he grinned broadly. He sauntered off to the barracks, stating that he would interview the mutineers.

Half an hour later he emerged, the army at his heels. Under his provokingly lazy eye, the men fell-in at the behest of the Subedar, and piled arms.

The civil war was over.

Communications passed between the State and the Governor of the Province, and the soldiery were paid, but there was bad blood between the Raja

and his brother, and the post-prandial durbars were a nightmare. The brother would sit glum, and glaring, and the Raja would sulk. We "courtiers" would stand around like dummies, not daring to break the silence.

If His Highness liked whisky, the brother's weakness was food, and particularly flesh food.

His Highness determined to have his own back, and a convenient Hindu holy period being at hand, he decreed that there should be no killing of beasts.

I stood this meatless period for four days without undue hardship, but my personal servant, a wild man from the Frontier, who lived on me in much the same manner as I lived on the Raja—on the principle of fleas and lesser fleas, I suppose—did not take kindly to the arrangement.

On the fifth day he came to me and whispered the magic word, "fish," and with my head concerned with other matters, and the sound not being altogether repungant, I gave the menu my blessing.

The fish was excellent, if a trifle muddy, though this was only to be expected so far from the sea.

That night when I attended the palace for the usual boredom of the durbar, I marked a particularly strained atmosphere as I made my way through the ante rooms. The usual smiles and nods were absent. Those in the corridors treated me as if I were a leper, and eased their shoulders away as I passed.

Catching sight of Sarkandar Singh as I approached the durbar hall, I asked him what was the matter. I thought perhaps His Highness had gone down with

a stroke. Nothing else could explain the funereal atmosphere.

He drew me into an alcove and whispered.

His words made me pause to take stock of my position.

Freely translated from the vernacular, they were: "You're for the high jump!"

I enquired the reason for this coming elevation, and Sarkandar Singh stroked his finely curled beard to add dignity to his answer.

"Your servant," he said, "was observed."

My eyes must have betokened my innocence and astonishment.

"He was seen fishing in the tank," he went on.

I gulped. I could understand the reason for the frostiness of my reception.

The tank—so-called—was a fair-sized ornamental lake, sacred to His Highness. It was the custom of the ruling House to scatter the ashes of the Royal departed therein after cremation, and the fish which literally teemed there were deemed more than sacred.

Without a doubt, Din Mahomed, my filibuster Frontiersman, had torn it.

With no very easy feelings I made my way into the durbar hall where I did my utmost to submerge my inches in the humanity which fringed the outskirts. But, the humanity would have none of me, and edged away. I was a conspicuous figure.

His Highness looked up with leaden gaze, and caught my eye. He maintained the gaze for several seconds, while all waited for the ceiling to drop.

"You have eaten my ancestors," he screamed. And I knew that I was looking for another job.

The soldiery were luckier than I. I did not have a British subaltern and twenty Gurkhas behind me. I did not get my salary, and the only manner in which I could sue for it was through the State courts. As the principal justice was a near relative of His Highness, besides being the Chief of Police and the Governor of the Jail in addition to his other duties, I decided to save myself the effort.

Later, in another State, I was thankful that I had held my hand.

This, however, is running away with the story.

CHAPTER III

THE TALE OF A CARTRIDGE

I GOT out of the State with my original £150 intact, a wealth of experience, and—if one can believe the Raja, some portion at least of his ancestors.

I was fortunate in that at the time of my spectacular dismissal, the Chamber of Princes was sitting in Delhi. I repaired there with all speed, and speedily found myself with employment. I became Home Minister in another State, and here, I am glad to relate, I *did* receive my salary.

His Highness here was a great sportsman, and because I was something of a shot, I made a hit with him. That the hit was to ricochet and rebound off my own person I had to discover in the fulness of time.

As Home Minister I had much to do with accounts, and I was frankly appalled with what I discovered. I found myself up against vested interests, very deeply entrenched, and I was expected to close my eyes and allow the good work of centuries to proceed.

His Highness, however, apart from a temper which could flare up like a powder magazine, was a good scout, and the limpets were no better than they should be.

I soon found that I could not even go to the bathroom without the fact being known in the palace within a very few seconds. The limpets had a remarkable intelligence system, and the rapidity with which they could transmit news, real or fictional, would have earned them a fortune in Fleet Street.

I had to watch my step, for I was more than *persona non grata* with the limpets, but I discovered that rigidity of conduct was a waste of time where these gentlemen were concerned.

Time and time again I was summoned to His Highness to explain something of which I was entirely ignorant. Things were attributed to me which in themselves were a wonderful testimonial to the imaginative powers of the limpets, and my lot was not a happy one.

It was while we were on a visit to another State that I had my eyes opened as to the futility of appealing to the State courts for justice against a ruler.

This particular Raja had bought jewels to an enormous value from a bazaar jeweller in Calcutta and for years the man had been endeavouring to obtain his money. The Raja was wily, and would commit nothing to paper. At length the jeweller's messenger was informed that if his master would present his account in person at the palace he would be paid.

The railway line ran straight through the State, and the jeweller appeared. The moment he set foot beyond the railway station he was on State territory. He was jostled by several men, and

arrested for brawling. He was flung into the State prison, and is still there for all I know.

The real parting of the ways with my employer came with the misadventures of a charm which had been given to him by a renowned yogi. The charm, wrapped in red and gold tinsel, was for suspension round the neck, and His Highness had a firm belief in its powers.

Soon after he became the possessor of this trinket it became necessary for him to proceed to Delhi, there to interview a high official in the Secretariat on the vexed question of guns. To tell you the number of guns which constituted his salute would give you some indication as to his identity. I will content myself with saying that he considered that his position warranted more, and as that applies to every ruler in the sub-continent, the clue is sufficiently vague.

We were on the train, some hours out of Delhi, when His Highness handed me a wallet with a diamond of which he desired to dispose. In actual fact, he commissioned me to put through the sale, much to the mortification of the assembled limpets, who would have made a good thing out of the transaction.

A little later His Highness started fidgiting, and at length delved beneath his coat to produce his charm. He hauled up the silken cord, and then—chaos—the charm was not there.

Frenziedly he felt in all his pockets. With equal frenzy the suite attacked his luggage, but the charm was not forthcoming.

With an imperious gesture His Highness shot forth an arm, and pulled the communication cord. The train came to a panting halt in a veritable wilderness.

His Highness glanced at me, and indicated the grim blackness beyond the glare of the carriage lights.

"Back to the palace with all speed," he ordered, "and bring the charm."

"But, your Highness," I protested, "there will be difficulties. There is no return train for many hours. . . ."

"Get a motor car!"

In the district in which we had halted I should be lucky even to procure a bullock cart, and said as much.

His Highness exploded into one of his ungovernable rages.

"Away," he shouted. "Away. When I command I require action—not words."

Dismally I descended from the train and scrambled down an embankment and through the wires guarding the permanent way. I was followed by a disconsolate orderly, and a mildly amused Din Mahomed.

We ploughed our way across hard, stony fields in darkness that could be felt, and eventually came to a road. This we followed for an hour, and discovered a village, or rather the village discovered us. We were assailed by a variety of dogs, and the martial orderly gave a spirited exhibition of a Scottish hornpipe.

Our requests for transport were received with extreme suspicion, and our enquiries for a motor car with ribald laughter. Rupees freely distributed from my small store secured for us a hearing, and we were informed that ten miles on there was indeed a Ford car of uncertain vintage. Those old Fords, however, where one emulated the man at the organ, could keep going on one cylinder. The probable odds were that two were working, and I took heart. With two rupees left in my pocket, a melancholy pony was produced and intimidated into a position between the shafts of a tonga, and we accomplished ten miles.

True, there was a Ford, but it was minus hood, the springs in its seats were indecorously revealed, but the owner had petrol, and the engine turned over. So far, so good.

With the engine running, and all prepared, our driver demanded money. He pointed out that we had descended upon him in the middle of the night, and that we might be just anybody. His manner seemed to suggest that, in his opinion, we were badmashes either escaping from the scene of a successful murder, or thugs setting out on some nefarious crime in which he was to be implicated.

Despairingly I told the man that I had but two rupees on me. I promised him untold wealth when we arrived in the State, but he was a ready-money merchant, and I cannot say that I blamed him.

While the argument was at its height, I felt Din Mahomed nudge me. The car proprietor suddenly

became silent. He had disappeared beneath the waters of the village pond. Din Mahomed was a muscular man.

Sensing the call for action, I jumped into the driver's seat and gave the Ford all she would take. We left the scene at a round fifteen miles per hour.

When we arrived at the palace it was to learn that His Highness had arrived in Delhi and had been on the telephone several times, not only furious because I had not already left with his charm, but doubly enraged because I had not even arrived in the State.

I commenced a systematic search for the charm, but it was not forthcoming. The work got warm, and I removed my coat, and handed my wallet to Din Mahomed, remarking: "Here, you hold this. I shall be losing this next."

Din Mahomed took the wallet, and began fingering it. Then he let out an exclamation.

"Sahib," he said excitedly, "there is no diamond here."

He pulled out an object from its folds, and it was the charm. His Highness had slipped up.

Obtaining one of the State Rolls I set out with all speed for Delhi. Arriving at His Highness's bungalow I was told that my employer had already departed for the Secretariat in the blackest of rages.

I tore to the Secretariat, and was able to slip the charm into the Raja's hands just before he was to enter on his interview.

Charm or no charm, His Highness was unsuccessful in his plaint, and he was inclined to hold this against

me. He declared that he had been too agitated clearly to state his case, and that this was entirely due to my lethargy and short-sightedness.

I allowed all this to pass, believing that when we returned to the State all would be forgotten in a round of sport.

There was one jheel in particular some thirty miles from the palace which was almost covered with duck, and I resolved that His Highness should have a record bag to enter into the State game books.

I returned to the State under a cloud, and pushed on the preparations for the shoot with all speed. I assured His Highness that he should have sport such as had never been known before—sport which would accord him tremendous publicity in the *Field* and the *Pioneer*, and he began to thaw.

A large company of notables was collected from neighbouring States, and the great day dawned. Twenty of the thirty miles to the jheel were covered in cars. The final ten we negotiated on sleek ponies from the palace stables.

All was set, and the air was thick with birds. They were flying so low that I suspected that the keepers had been chivvying them for the past few days so that they were thirsty and would dare anything to secure water.

With elaborate ceremony the notables were conducted to selected butts, and all was ready for the slaughter.

Sitting back from the jheel, not caring to shoot myself, I watched the scene with smiling equanimity. I waited for the barrage.

Yet, a strange stillness was on the air. There were the birds, swirling round in thousands, asking for death. Beaters were ready within the reeds along the shore to wade out and retrieve shot-ridden bodies.

I waited with a growing impatience, and then with considerable disquiet.

In the distance I could hear a rumbling akin to an approaching thunderstorm. It was His Highness, and it was obvious that something had vexed him.

I advanced in some trepidation, and as I neared him he shook his twelve-bore in my face. He was almost incoherent with anger, and he thrust his gun under my nose.

"What—what is this?" he demanded.

"Your gun, your Highness."

"What make is it, imbecile?"

"It is your Greening, your Highness."

"What—what bore is it?"

"Twelve, your Highness."

He felt in his shooting pocket, and flung a handful of cartridges in my faces.

Miserably I picked one up.

It was for a sixteen-bore gun.

No wonder not a shot had been fired.

The limpets had pulled out their ace and had won.

I gave up.

CHAPTER IV

I TRADE WITH A JEW

As I have remarked, His Highness was a good scout. I suspect that he knew all about the limpets and that his grouse against me was that I was unable to get the better of them. In any event, he gave me six months' salary in lieu of notice and, with what I had been able to save, the bank balance assumed robust proportions.

This job-hunting, however, was getting me down. I wanted something where there was security of tenure—something where my energies could be devoted to my work rather than to staving off intrigue and its almost inevitable consequences.

I wondered how I would fare on my own, and I cast round in my mind for an avenue which I could fill.

Almost instinctively I was drawn to Delhi, and there, wandering through the Chandi Chowk, my eye was taken by a Persian carpet. It was a rug of wondrous beauty and one such as was seldom imported by the caravans for sale in the Indian bazaars. I can tell a good rug on sight, and even without fingering the texture I knew that there was a prize for someone.

I approached the rug merchant, and began to talk idly of Kashmiri numdas, on the age-old

Eastern principle of beginning as far away from one's subject as possible.

For half an hour we both talked gravely of numdas, the merchant, meanwhile, stroking with extreme nonchalance the pile of the rug which he knew had attracted my attention.

I consented to notice it at length, and enquired its price. Even as a jumping-off point—a price three times which the merchant would eventually accept—it was moderately rated, and after the usual haggling, and the rug was mine, I ventured to remark that I had secured a bargain.

The rug dealer agreed with me, then confessed that he had secured it for a very low price. He waxed confidential, and I became interested.

The rug, it seemed, had come from a merchant in Bokhara, and Bokhara, now under the domination of the Soviet, was undergoing some startling changes. Bokhara, always regarded as one of the strongholds of the Faith in the whole of Central Asia, had become part of the Soviet Republic, and the rich merchants, in the face of the levelling influences of Bolshevism where all men must, or should be, equal, were fast liquidating their stocks before the fear of confiscation.

The merchants who had made the fame of Bokhara, and who once strutted its dusty streets as lords of the universe, were now shaking in their shoes, and were anxious to sell, almost at any price.

I returned to my hotel in a thoughtful frame of mind.

There was just beginning the Sovietisation of large tracts of Central Asia, the result, as far as Eastern

rugs are concerned, to be seen in the flooding of the Western market in the past decade, and a tumbling down of prices never before experienced.

If conditions were such as were painted in Bokhara, and even beyond, why should not I seek to take advantage of another's reverse. If the Bokharan merchants were anxious to sell, why should I not become a rug-buyer, and skim the cream of the market?

In the end I resolved to do so, and leaving my wife in Delhi, I made my way northward.

I travelled via Kabul, and there I heard strange tales of the Bokharan Emir who had taken refuge in Afghanistan's capital.

It was eighteen months before, in 1920, that Emir Said-Alim-Bahadur Khan woke one morning to find his palace on fire. The revolutionists were in control and an end had come to a thorough Eastern despotism which had ruled through many centuries. With the firing of the palace, Holy Bokhara awoke from a sleep of the Middle Ages—a sleep wherein merchant and cleric waxed fat, and the workers were so many serfs. In other ways also, Bokhara had been essentially Shakespearean, in that no Jew might ride through its streets. Disfigured by a rough girdle of rope round his middle to proclaim to all his lowly status, the Jew considered himself fortunate if he was allowed to trudge the street undefiled by expectoration. Had he essayed to as much as a donkey, he would have been lynched.

On all this the Emir cast a lazy and tolerant eye. As long as the Jews were not maimed, and therefore

incapacitated—for they were good-taxpayers—he did not mind. His thoughts were elsewhere, and they centred principally upon his harems, of which he had two. The first contained approximately one hundred women, whose charms were the subject of song throughout Central Asia. They were famous, and they were kept up to standard by continuous recruitment. Dignity and elevation could be secured by any who made the Emir the present of a fair daughter.

Of the second harem I had heard more, and I did not need the hangers-on around the Emir's person in Kabul to acquaint me with its details. In this he had a bevy of nectarine-complexioned dancing boys. The parents who proffered their male offspring received a gold medal, specially struck by the Emir, to commend their generosity. In my subsequent travels I came across several of these marks of Royal favour. They were worn without embarrassment, and even a certain dignity.

When the Emir found his palace on fire it is to be remarked that he forsook his women and only waited to collect a score or so of his more winsome dancing boys before fleeing to the hills of the East. He had taken the precaution of despatching a considerable fortune to European banks, so that he had no need to dally in his going. In the East, before finally descending upon Afghanistan, he made an attempt to rescue his Emirate. For the moment he lacked funds. Unfortunately, the European banks had no branches north of the Oxus. There were in the neighbourhood, however, a number of

immensely rich Jews. He called them before him, accused them of stirring up the peasantry and aiding the Bolsheviks.

This last act of the despot brought over £200,000 to his coffers.

It was into an atmosphere, rendered electric by the sudden upheaval of old Bokharan customs, that I was making my way. I believed that there was little in the East that could surprise me, but I was mistaken.

I think that I am now dealing with a page of history about which the world knows nothing. I do not mean the world at large which could hardly be expected, in the amazing changes which came with the emergence of peace, to take cognisance of yet another war, but that inner world of diplomats, Governments and journalists which keeps tally of things which do not affront ordinary ears.

At the time of which I am speaking Europe was still learning to accustom its ways to the rigours of peace. Mr. Lloyd George was being assailed by the Moslem world for what he was threatening to do to Turkey; the Near East was fast dividing itself up into sovereignties and mandated territories; the Soviet tide was yet seeping outward and then, as now, the Kremlin looked with fear not at the German or Central Asian borders, but at Manchuria, and the Japanese. The Government of India, having just concluded peace with King Amanullah of Afghanistan, had its hands full with recalcitrant Wazirs, an internal situation which was painfully near anarchy, and the backlash of Mr. Lloyd George's threats to

Turkey. In order to display their abhorrence of these, and to shake off the dust of a Raj which could utter such threats to their religion, thousands upon thousands of misguided persons had made, or were still making, their way to the Frontier. Hundreds were dying. Thousands were destitute.

One could carry on the picture, but I have indicated sufficient to show that the world at large was then very intimately concerned with its own business. Frankly, unless it was something which touched on its own immediate problems, it couldn't be bothered. The newspapers did not lack headlines, and there was no need to rake the world for news. There was too much on one's own doorstep.

Bolshevism had over-run the East until it had piled itself up against the mountain fastnesses of Afghanistan. The world shook its shoulders. It was regrettable, but as long as Afghanistan remained, there was a buffer State and nothing much mattered. After all, it was only the old Russian bogey brought up to date and modernised.

When the Emir had retreated, he had the sum of £200,000 with which to finance a campaign against the Reds. He looked around for a leader, and always in the glamorous East one was forthcoming even as he toyed with the idea.

There was among the Lokei tribe a bandit with the picturesque name of Ibrahim which did not prevent him being the most successful and audacious horse thief in all Bokhara. While the Emir was head-chopping, Ibrahim was searching the hills for Reds

—and loot—and when he returned from a successful expedition the Emir greeted him as a gift sent from Allah.

Ibrahim could neither read nor write, but the Emir was then considerably adding to his war chest by the free disposal of honours. Perhaps he knew that the period of giving was soon to pass, and anyone with money could bow the knee and rise bedecked. There is snobbery even in the East. He wished to confer ennoblement upon his horse thief, but illiteracy proved almost an insuperable difficulty.

Someone with a mordant sense of humour suggested the title of the “Keeper of the Royal Stables,” and the Emir, not sensing the irony, gave forth the glad tidings to all.

There is, however, such a thing as professional honour, and Ibrahim and all his fellow tribesmen of the Lokei took umbrage. Promiscuous horse thieving is one thing, but *professional* horse-thieving is another. The Emir could not have made a bigger *faux pas* if he had referred to Fred Perry as a “pro.”

Instead of securing an ally against the Reds, the Emir almost found a deadly enemy. The whole Lokei tribe stormed around the house where Said-Alim had taken refuge, until he emerged, somewhat shaken by the storm, and announced that there had been an error in the *firman*. Ibrahim was not the Keeper of the Royal Stables—he had enough horses of his own, Ha! Ha!—but the Keeper of the Royal Purse.

The Lokeis, observing the decapitated men, broke

into loud cheers, and an awkward moment had passed.

When I arrived in Bokharā, Ibrahim had earned the title of the Ghazi and was still rampaging through the district. Ostensibly, he was still operating on behalf of the Emir, then lounging amidst the comforts of Kabul, but I have no doubt that had he succeeded against the Soviet, he would have carved out a kingdom for himself. He was, however, to fail, for when I returned to Bokhara long afterwards the people had tired of him, and he, too, was in Kabul living on the sweet fruits of pillage.

Here again I am anticipating. . . .

At this time Ibrahim commanded nearly fifty thousand horsemen, the majority of whom were armed with modern rifles, and he was a real thorn in the side of the Soviet. Almost, but not quite, did he roll back the waves of Bolshevism, and he might have succeeded had his eye not been too much on the main chance. His early upbringing as a horse-thief and an opportunist was against him.

He might have had an ally in the great Enver Pasha, the Turkish General, who had been operating in Central Asia for some time, but Ibrahim had only his own interests at heart. The Turk envisaged a great Pan-Moslem alliance and a Holy War against Moscow. The vision was too much for Ibrahim. Besides, Enver Pasha wore European clothes, and was therefore suspect.

Enver Pasha had fled away from Baku before the barking of Zinovieff and he saw a promising field for his propaganda among the tribesmen of Bokhara

and Afghanistan. Bokhara being in a state of flux, and up against a force which was avowedly anti-religious, he tarried there. Enver had forces at his command, and while I was in Bokhara there were many sharp conflicts between him and the Reds. He was uniformly unsuccessful, principally because he could never rely upon Ibrahim. Ibrahim wanted him out of the way, and he saw that Enver's force was slowly killed off. He would tell the Turk that the Reds were to be found in one direction. Unaccountedly, the Reds would learn where Enver had gone, and would ambush him. This kind of sabotage could not go on for ever, and one day news was brought in that Enver was dead. He had been killed by a small reconnoitring party and had been identified both by his raiment and a small Koran in his pocket which bore his name.

Ibrahim might still have been successful if he had given his mind to war, but there was a lady in the case. She had both wealth and position, and she disdained to look at a horse-thief. Had she done so in the first place she might now have been a queen, but her disparagement so much inflamed Ibrahim that he would postpone battle for a sight of his lady love. There are strict injunctions against such tactics in the best military manuals.

I learned later that Ibrahim, just before he decided to give the Soviet best, called on his girl friend at dead of night and abducted her. Still later, when in Kabul, where Ibrahim had taken up his quarters, I found that she was still with him. They had been duly married, and were supremely happy.

The reason why Ibrahim held out so long against Soviet dominance was because even now Moscow has to tread warily when dealing with the tribesmen on its far borders. Those along the Manchukuoan border in Mongolia receive preferential treatment. It can almost be said that Moscow panders to them, because the Kremlin wants their goodwill in the event of war with Japan. Similarly, in many parts bordering on Afghanistan, the old feudal conditions still obtain. Little or nothing has been done in the way of nationalisation because, on the mere suspicion of this the wealth of the countryside would disappear in a night. The tribesmen would drive their thousands of cattle and sheep over the border, and Moscow would be the poorer.

While the tempo of life in Central Asia was being quickened even while I trod the lanes of Bokhara, I bought steadily.

I found that the merchants were more than anxious to sell and I made many wonderful bargains.

With one merchant I struck up a happy arrangement which allowed me to deal outside my own limited capital. In this case I arranged for the consignment of bales to Bombay in his name. The bales were lodged at my bank. When I handed over the purchase money to the bank they, in their turn, would give me possession of the rugs. It was an arrangement which was indefinite as to time, the merchant well understanding that I had to dispose of the rugs for which I had paid cash before I could complete the transaction. He was, however, more than content with the arrangement, having faith in the bona fides

of the bank if not in mine. He was thankful, too, that I was making arrangements for transportation, and that the financial aspects of the bargain were secret between us. Being a foreigner, I could remove what I required without comment. Also, another consideration inclined him toward the scheme. At a date sufficiently vague as to be indefinite, he would be placed in funds by a bank of repute in far off Bombay. Bombay was only just far enough from the Reds to overcome his scruples. He suggested in the first place that I should consign the goods to London. I would have done had not the thought of additional carriage cost deterred me.

During my days in Bokhara I had plenty of opportunity in becoming acquainted with its quaintness. Accustomed to the cleanliness of my father's home, the austere and almost fanatical hygiene of the English, the well-ordered sanitation of cities like Bombay, Delhi and Peshawar and that which passes for such in Indian State capitals, I was appalled by the amazing squalor of a city so incredibly old and, until recently, fantastically rich.

Every street was thick with dust, which the slightest breeze disturbed. A pretence at keeping the dust in place was made by bhistis who sprinkled water from goat-skins. The water for this purpose was carried from a large stagnant pool which served also as the principal water supply for the city. The bhistis would wade knee deep into the pool to fill their skins, taking the filth of the roads with them. Now I believe, under a more rigorous Soviet ægis, they are made to wear shoes. They still wade into

the pool, but their bare feet do not touch the water!

It is extraordinary, I think, how primitive water systems seem to be allied with holiness. Jerusalem, until the advent of the British, filled its tea-cups from a mass of green slime near the age-old walls. Benares, where the Ganges is thick with the cremated remains of departed Hindus, draws its water from the river.

Never, during the whole of the time I was in Bokhara, did I drink any water whose boiling I had not personally supervised. There is a small wire worm in the water there something like that found in the streams above Jaffa, in Palestine, and I did not relish the thought of a perforated stomach. Most of the residents of Bokhara suffer from indigestion because of the ravages of this microscopical worm.

While I was in the city there was an almost constant migration of mullahs. There had been thousands in Bokhara before the advent of the Soviet, and their schools were famous throughout central Asia. Many of maddrussis, or schools, still abound, but now they are given over to more secular uses.

The mullahs were moving out into the districts where their power was still felt, though some were leaning an ear toward Soviet doctrines to discover if these could not be twisted to their own ends. Now, many of these mullahs are presidents of local Soviet councils—ironically enough, heads of bodies officially atheist. But the East smiles; and so do the mullahs. They still rule—and it is unwise to disagree with the mullah.

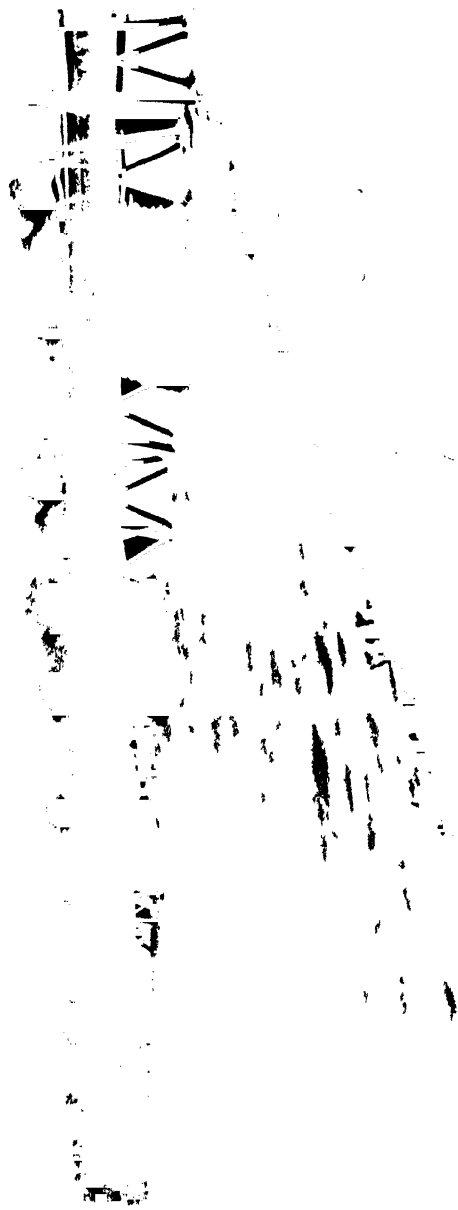
It was a mullah who sent me on further travels. Being aware of the nature of my commitments with the merchants, and knowing the character of the credit trade which I was also negotiating—for the mullahs know all—he approached me one day with a proposition.

There were other merchants, he said, further afield, who would be glad to trade with me under similar conditions. Many of them, because of the wave of nationalisation and because of the changed attitude of the peasants, had buried their goods. They would welcome, he assured me, a visit from such a man as I.

He would give me letters of introduction and, if I lacked funds—well he knew of a Jew who had heard of my activities and was prepared to muscle in.

I made satisfactory arrangements with my Jew—apparently I was to take all the knocks and run all the danger for the additional security which went with the loan of his name, and I prepared to depart.

I admit that without the aid of the Jew, the preparations could never have been initiated, because I had to collect together a number of camels, and in the unsettled state of the country, camel men demanded money on the spot. Few, indeed, could blame them, for there was no knowing how long their employer would be alive—and a dead man's bond is worthless—or how long it would be before the banditry which infested the hills would swoop down and collect their camels.



OUR CARAVAN WINDING ITS WEARY WAY

Before I started out I knew that I was on a hazardous quest.

I would have had little to do with the Jew, and would have been content with my present gains, had I had the faintest inkling of what was coming to me.

CHAPTER V

TOWARD SAMARKHAND

It was no easy matter collecting camels at this period and it was some weeks before my preparations were complete. It never pays to hurry the East, and if I were to have camels capable of standing up to long marches, it was up to me to exercise patience.

It was in November when I commenced my search for suitable animals among the many thousands in the neighbourhood of Bokhara. I reckoned that I would have to pay a good price because of the hazards of the road, but the difficulties which I encountered with the camel men almost caused me to abandon my project.

I was offered camels which had come in from long journeys and, therefore, much worn down. They required rest on good pasture for at least two months before they would be fit for the road, and I had to reject them. I was looking for first-rate animals, thick of coat and firm of hump. Because I came from the south the camel men suffered from the delusion that I knew nothing about camels. A Frontiersman, however, knows something about most things on four legs.

It was in the beginning of December before I collected thirty animals which I considered up to

standard, and even then I had 'qualms, for December is the rutting season. There were three bulls in my string, and these I did my utmost to discard, because a bull camel on the rampage can upset any caravan, and be definitely dangerous.

Two days before we were due to start, one of the bulls went mad and went off in search of a harem. We did our best to track him down, but we had to proceed carefully because anything, be it animal or man, which gets in the way of a bull and his pleasure, is likely to be savaged.

You have probably watched a camel munching. Its jaws move sideways, and slide one over the other. Such an action can produce horrible mutilation, and as the camel is generally syphilitic, a bite is not to be invited.

Only very experienced camel men can handle these beasts during the rutting season, and then only with guile. The least untoward movement enrages them, and then they are fighting with their horrible teeth and their great foot pads. Once they have a man down they will kneel on him and crush the life out of him. And, once a camel does attack in earnest there is little that one can do except shoot him. Blows mean nothing to him. His terrible rage renders him utterly insensible to pain.

As I have said, I had regarded the presence of the bulls with extreme distrust, for bull camels are rarely included in caravans during the rutting season. I had, however, to take what I could get. The camel men had assured me that they would underfeed the bulls and give them the heaviest loads in order to wear down their amorous instincts.

I was anxious, also, not to be troubled with cows in calf—not that I expected any offspring on the road because I did not intend to be away as long. I wanted work out of the camels, and a camel man will underload a cow who has mated.

Appropos of my remark about the length of time I intended to be travelling—a cow carries her calf for thirteen months. When she throws her offspring she is fit for work within a few hours. After that she thins and weakens considerably under suckling—and a calf may remain suckled for eighteen months. A camel, therefore, rarely has another calf in less than three years after mating.

We never found our love-mad bull, and I was not sorry. In the end, I cast off the remaining two bulls. I caught one of the cows dribbling at the lips and casting a lascivious eye in their direction. It was best to have temptation out of the way.

It was with a string of twenty-seven animals that I eventually started.

And what a start.

I had determined to begin my quest for rugs in the neighbourhood of Duschambe. It was to Duschambe that many merchants had fled from Samarkhand, and it was also at Duschambe that the Emir Said-Alim had vent his displeasure on the Jews. There are those who will say that I was a fool to thrust my nose into such troubled territory, but—where there is trouble and life is held cheap, goods are at a discount and real money at a premium—especially the money I could offer, safe in a reputable bank many thousands of

miles away from brigands and the pillage of Sovietisation.

My camel men were mainly from the Mongolian border—men accustomed to unsettled times, and not unduly affected by that which was now happening around me. Their passion was tea, and—brick-like tea which they carried with them for many months. It has to be stewed for a long time to bring out all the juices in it, as the Mongolians believe that it assists digestion and can be drunk with meat. The bricks are a noxious mixture of tea dust, twigs and refuse—the scourings of the warehouses of Hankow—and my men would never dream of breaking camp unless fortified with several bowls of this rot-gut mixture.

On the morning that I gave the order to march I had to preserve my soul in patience while the men lined (or unlined) their stomachs.

Bowl after bowl of the beverage was put away, some of them thickened with a few handfuls of cereal, and then, when all stomachs were dangerously distended, the camel master cried out in a conversational voice: "We will drink tea!"

I thought that all that had gone before was merely the prelude to a bout of determined and serious drinking, but I had a lot to learn from these people.

I think they imbue much of their waywardness from the camels they habitually tend.

To the invitation to "Drink tea," all the men responded with the cry, "Drink t-e-a!" and that was the signal to be up and doing. Some of the more perverse did indeed snatch up yet another bowl of

tea, but the majority rushed to their camels and ushered them into line. They forced them to kneel, and swung up the baggage. Last of all to be loaded was the cauldron of tea. It had been left over a smouldering fire, and when all was in readiness, the dregs were served out. The disappearance of the last dreg was really the signal to march.

The important thing was to keep away from the tramlings and the unknown dangers of civil war, and for that reason we kept apart from the usual routes as far as this was practicable.

Some of the terrain which we covered was difficult, and the cow camels, excited and then disappointed by the removal of the bulls, were in no sweet mood. The baggage, I suppose, did not sit as snugly as it might, for it was bound to "ride" a little when sometimes the road was uphill and sometimes down. For the first few days, especially the cows—and they were all cows—were snarling, and ever ready to spit their slimy, green cud.

I think the cow is more proficient in spattering her arch-enemy, man, by this means than the bull. Her aim is good, and she never misses.

As the cows were fresh from pasture and had carried no loads for some time they were quite free with their attentions, for they had plentiful supplies.

The smell attaching to this ghastly fluid is beyond my descriptive powers. It is something between that given off by a field of long dead carcasses and a glue-factory with a twenty-four hour licence. Add to this the aroma of a few stink bombs and a soupçon of all the corruption and pestilence which has been

since the time of Adam, and then one is breathing the sweet odours of eau-de-Cologne in comparison.

And, it is useless to attempt to wash off the mess. One has to walk about with it until it dries. Then it can be flaked off.

I went meatless on the whole of this march because I could not bring myself to eat the flesh which was cooked by the camel men. They had a curious method of killing which was designed to overcome the clan law which forbids the shedding of blood. They would seize a sheep, slit the stomach with a knife, thrust in a hand, and grasp the heart. So skilfully was this done that hardly a drop of blood was shed. The men assured me that this system also had the advantage of imparting to the meat a full, gamey flavour, as all the blood was retained. I took their word for it.

During the time we were on the march, the camel men would knit. I had never seen men do this before, and when I asked the reason I was told that the Russians of Czarist days had spread the custom. Camel hair socks are eagerly sought by those who have to travel the mountain ranges in winter, and a good trade is done in them.

Incidentally, I discovered why so many of the camels were deficient of hair along their necks. When the men ran out of yarn, they would lean forward, snatch a handful of hair from the unfortunate camel, and roll it in their palms. The usual spinning weight was attached, and this would revolve, jerking with each movement of the camel, while the man fed hair into the thread until there was a sufficient quantity

of yarn to continue the sequence of purl and plain. But, perhaps it was all plain. I never enquired, and indeed never knew that there was a purl and a plain until my wife put the question to me long afterwards.

Perhaps I would have solved this little mystery if I had not been so preoccupied. Remember it was December, and the nights out in the hilly country were cold. I was the proud possessor of several suits of woollen underclothes. These allow more movement than does the heavy poshteen more usual in the district. A poshteen is a voluminous coat of sheepskin, crudely cured, and with the wool worn inside. It is an excellent garment for keeping out the biting winds which one encounters, but is apt to harbour things. I knew that I would have to face discomforts, but as far as possible I had determined to short-circuit "Things."

We had halted at a number of villages, and I had picked up a number of excellent "parcels," when I made my discovery. I found an insect in my shirt. With considerable disgust I bore it off to the camel master, and he refused even to show surprise.

"What is it?" I demanded.

"A louse," he answered smilingly, as if conferring a great honour.

"A louse!"

"For sure," he said, showing his teeth. "What else could it be. Haven't you been scratching yourself for the past week?"

It was true. I had been contorting myself for days, and I had made suspicious searches before, but without success.

I had always believed that a louse was a large and vicious insect. Anything which occupied such a large place in the world's history, must, I thought, be easily identifiable. Then I bethought myself of the French word "Pou" and was not so certain. There is almost something of affection and light-heartedness in "Pou," but then the Latins were ever volatile.

In all my many wanderings I had never seen a louse. I had seen bugs, fleas, scorpions, centipedes and, under the microscope a wonderful series of germs, all immensely formidable. But this louse was pale and minute, and seemed incapable of inflicting so much discomfort.

There was a small black spot in his middle.

The camel master showed his teeth again.

The black spot, he explained, was a bit of me.

In the months which were to follow I was to make acquaintance with a legion of these insects. I hunted them out assiduously, and caught them young.

I would hang my woollens out in the cold air at night in the hope of freezing the little devils to death, but I only succeeded in numbing them. This, however, had the effect of rendering their hold less tenacious, and they would come tumbling from one's clothes when the garments were beaten with a stick.

In the end I relied entirely upon the thumb and forefinger method, as the one sure means of extermination. I have known lice to survive a sustained

boiling. It was really a war of aggression in which persistence and perseverance won. Not a day passed without a thorough offensive, and although the enemy proved immensely mobile and adept in taking the smallest amount of cover, the guerilla bands were kept within reasonable compass.

I thought of all kinds of schemes for routing lice before I settled down to a dull routine of persistence. I examined them carefully, but was never able to determine their sex. I was unable, therefore, to concentrate on the bulls, and to leave the cows to die disconsolate for want of attention. It had to be an all-in massacre. Most relentless was the attention which had to be paid to the children.

My striving toward cleanliness was a continual joy and delight to the camel men, who are remarkably philosophical in such matters.

At one of our halts there was a well, and rather a deep one. I asked the camel master to tell off one of the men to draw me water in order that I might bathe.

It was a long time in arriving, and when I protested it was pointed out to me that the level of the water was so far down that the sun's rays were never reflected in it. I replied that water was water, and that I wanted some.

The man went off grumbling, declaring that such water was "cold" and afflicted and that bad luck would come of my washing. I ignored the warning, and washed. I am inclined to think that the bad luck which was just in the offing would have arrived, water or no water.

Next day we arrived at a village not far from Samarkhand, and here a busy fair was in progress. I decided to remain here a while in the hope of picking up business, and I spent hours wandering around the fair ground. Here were merchants exchanging their goods for the products of the hills and the Black Desert—wool, cattle, ponies, camels and the like, and both vendor and purchaser were openly dishonest.

The man bringing in hay from the pastures would wet the middle of the trusses, and perhaps add boulders to increase the weight. The trader selling flour would use a small measure. He buying wool would provide himself with a doctored weight. The man selling wool would have added a plentiful sprinkling of dirt and sand, but the merchant buying it, in addition to his doctored weight, would have a cleverly adjusted balance. In point of roguery, both sides probably came out quits.

Wandering round the fair ground I noticed the presence of a number of peasants who were now and again required to mount a sort of rostrum. I was not specially interested, for much the same thing occurs in some of the northern hill States of India. There, peasants would hire out their services for the year to the highest bidder. Much the same kind of thing is still done in England, I believe, at some of the country fairs, though the gradual trade-unionisation of the countryside is tending to kill old semi-feudal practices.

I was the less interested because I knew of the presence of a hill State near Simla where a

marriage mart is annually held where brides dispose of their charms to him who will pay most. I was concerned with rugs and neither with servants nor brides. I noticed, however, that the camel master seemed uneasy.

He told me the place was bad, and he advised me to leave and to return to Bokhara. I refused incontinently. I was out for big business.

CHAPTER VI

I TASTE THE WHIP

THAT night, sleeping in a stuffy lodging—for I deemed it safer to sleep away from the camels with so many queer characters about—I was troubled by dreams. I experienced a curious choking sensation, and I remember fighting in my sleep as if to ward off the fumes of an anæsthetic. Then I was lifted, and transported through the streets with a black cloth over my head, and thrown down contemptuously as one would toss a sack of corn.

When I awoke, my dream was still vivid with me, and I thought how realistic it had been, for I was stiff and sore. My head ached vilely, and I attempted to raise my hand to ease my throbbing forehead. To my consternation I discovered that it was immovable and then, to my growing horror, that my wrists were lashed together.

I was in a dark room completely devoid of furniture. I took it to be a storehouse of a kind. When my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I saw other forms huddled around me. Every now and again one or the other would emit a groan.

There was a pungent aroma in the stuffy air, but it eluded me. I felt that I should be able to identify it, but every time I tried to think there came a deep

throbbing in my temples, and I had to lie back and give up the task.

Then, subconsciously, realisation came. It was the unmistakable smell of opium. Recklessly I fought with the sabre thrusts which threatened to cut open my forehead, and made myself think.

I am not an opium addict—I loathe the drug, as indeed I do all spirits and narcotics. How, then, had I been rendered unconscious—for unconscious I had undoubtedly been? Without the bemusing effects of the drug I should have known immediately, for it is an ancient trick, and one practised through the centuries in India by robbers and thugs.

Poppy dust had been squirted at me from the barred window of my apartment. It was probably projected through a thin bamboo reed. It had settled on my face, and my deep nocturnal breathing had done the rest.

I had been abducted, and was now held prisoner. Probably the men who had encompassed my arrest thought that they had corralled some rich merchant. I smiled grimly to myself, for they would be mistaken. My worldly goods were bound up in a series of documents and receipts—and the Central Asian freebooter despises paper. It means nothing to him. He requires all his loot to be in kind. Notwithstanding the pain in my head I smiled when I thought of the pleasure that would be mine when I confronted these people with a wad of indifferently inscribed receipts and orders upon a bank in far away Bombay. I considered myself reasonably safe.

I was forced to remain in my constricted position for what seemed many hours before the groans of those around me were drowned by the coarse shouts of men. It was impossible to see the newcomers clearly, but I saw enough to expect rough treatment. One, a burly, bearded ruffian, stalked into the room and submitted each recumbent figure to a lightning examination. He would grasp a man by the hair, pull him into a sitting position, glare into his eyes, grunt, and then thrust the helpless victim from him. Heads would return to the hard surface of the floor with a crack, for we all had our hands bound behind us.

My turn came. I was hauled upwards; I looked into a pair of villainous eyes, and I was thrust rudely back.

In the wake of this visitor there came another. He had a brass pot filled with water, a quantity of which he forced into each mouth as he passed. The vessel was pressed against the lips of Mongol, Turkoman, peasant, and camel man alike.

The man came to me and I compressed my lips tightly. Apart from the fact that I am a clean-living Moslem, I had no desire to drink from a communal drinking cup. The man, observing my determination, grunted savagely to himself, and forced the rim of the bowl against my lips until the pain forced them apart. A mouthful of vile liquid followed, and I choked. In my rage, I expectorated the water in his face. He jumped backwards with a snarl, and stood contemplating me, cursing me in the choicest terms of the desert.

He kicked me as I lay, then rushed outside. He returned with a mulberry switch, and belaboured me unmercifully. Each involuntary twitching of my body sent fierce, piercing stabs through my head, and I found myself sweating like a labouring horse. I succeeded, however, in stifling the cries of pain which leaped to my throat. Only did I curse this man, and in terms rounder than those in which he had cursed me. Finally, exasperated by my taunting, he swung the switch across my face, and with a final lunge with his boot, left me, to follow up his ministrations with the water bowl.

When he had gone, a figure near me gave tongue.

The voice was weak, and colourless. It rambled along on a dreadful monotone, and was entirely spiritless.

"He is but a fool who invites punishment," said the speaker. "It comes, all too frequently—all too frequently, without the asking."

I struggled up into a sitting posture, and addressed the recumbent bundle.

"The man insulted me," I replied hotly. "Am I an animal to be so treated?"

"You are a human animal," the other retorted in his dead voice. "You seem strong, and you have spirit, therefore you should fetch a good price. But, take my advice—never invite trouble. . . ."

"If these men expect a ransom, why do they not treat one properly. Is it any gain to them that their captives should die?"

The other gave a ghastly laugh, entirely deficient in humour. "You will not die," he said. "They

will see to that, but—there will be times when you wish you could.”

“Do they keep one for so long?” I was beginning to become apprehensive, for there was a desperate sincerity in the toneless words of the speaker which was numbing. He, too, struggled to a sitting position, and groaned.

“Who are you?” he asked, faintly.

I told him. I said that I was a merchant who was engaged in buying rugs. I assumed that I, together with the others in this evil smelling apartment, had been captured by local banditry for ransom.

When I had finished he again gave that hollow, toneless laugh.

“Listen,” he said tensely. “We have been taken by slavers. In all probability you will be sold. I was a slave before this, and it seems that I have been taken to be sold again.”

His words chilled me, for I had heard something of the slave traders of Bokhara. I had assumed, however, that the dismissal of the Emir had put an end to the traffic. Any doubts which I may have entertained had been dispersed by the fact that I was a merchant. It was widely known that merchants could ordinarily regard themselves as safe from slavers. I had, however, been unduly optimistic in that I had failed properly to appreciate events in Bokhara. I had assumed that the Soviet had a bigger hold than it had. In my ignorance I had taken it for granted that Lenin had been able to accomplish something in which the Czars, in all their might, had always failed.

"Who are you?" I asked this figure in return.

He told me a long and rambling story; for which I do not vouch.

He was, he said, a Persian and ten years before he had joined a caravan journeying to Bokhara on a merchant venture.

The lately ousted Emir—an autocrat in everything—had the superintendence of every State department in his hands. Especially did he devote his energies to the department of customs.

This Persian arrived safely at the house of a relative, and his presence was reported to the Emir. He was required to usher himself into the Royal presence, to give an account of his nationality, and his business. His relatives, aware of the character of the inquisition, gave him advice. This briefly, was that he should temper truth with modesty.

The Emir was better informed than the relatives knew, for he turned upon the Persian, called him a liar to his face, and ordered him to the lock-up. For two days and two nights he was kept without food and water. During this time he entreated passers-by to give him water, at least. When the thirst was first upon him he used terms of entreaty. When it had really taken a grip of his stomach, he added to this, abuse. His purpose was to bring the matter to a head. Death, he thought, was preferable to thirst.

On the morning of the third day he would still have had his thirst had not another Persian prisoner from his own part of the country smuggled water to him. Later that day he was taken from the lock-

up, placed in the market as a common slave, and sold. All his goods were taken, and sold also.

He informed me that then the slave market was held twice a week, when all who had men and women for sale exposed them. There were, he added, brokers regularly engaged in the trade, and that the Persian and Russian captives in Bokhara almost exceeded the ordinary inhabitants in number.

Others among the bound figures began to take part in the conversation, and my ignorance of conditions surprised them.

I was told that the slave trading went back to times immemorial, and that no agency in Moscow or Teheran would ever be able to bring an end to the practice. Although the Turkoman and Yahut tribesmen had been nominally at peace with Persia, I was informed that incursions into that country were frequent; that towns and villages were ravaged, and that the captives were sold either in Khiva or Bokhara. I was told, too, that the Khirgiz and Kusak tribes often made prisoners of Russians, and that there were between twelve to fifteen thousand Russian captives in various parts of the country.

These captives, it was said, formed the bulk of the labouring population. Always were they required to work under the surveillance of armed men, and the least show of spirit or defiance was rewarded with the most terrible beatings.

In my agitation I asked what the Governments of Teheran and Russia did to safeguard their nationals. I was informed that immense desert steppes intervened between the Persian captives

and anything that could be instituted by Teheran, and that as far as the old Russia was concerned, the tribesmen could afford to laugh at the thunderings from Moscow.

One man recalled a story which he been handed down—as all these are—by word of mouth from the closing years of the reign of the Empress Catherine. It seemed that she sent emissaries to Khiva and to Bokhara to ascertain the number of Russian prisoners detained in captivity. My informant—no doubt the figure had grown with the passage of years—said that the emissaries returned with the information that there were 60,000 in Bokhara and 40,000 in Khiva. The Empress, appalled by this news, sent to the Emir demanding that her subjects be released, declaring that war would follow a refusal. As was customary, the demand was met with amused shrugs, and the Empress concentrated a large force on Astrakhan. This army actually set out on its march of liberation and vengeance, but it had failed to release a single captive when news was brought of the death of the Empress. The Russian army returned. This, as far as contemporary Bokharan history went, and as far as I have been able subsequently to discover, represented the one real effort on the part of the Russians to stop the flooding of the slave marts on the trans-Oxus region.

I need not dwell on my reactions to all this information.

I need not add that I was at once consumed with a smouldering rage, and a feeling of most soul-numbing fear.

I thought of all kinds of schemes whereby I could induce my captors to agree to release me. I would pay almost any price rather than be herded about the country performing menial labour under the urge of the lash. All the time, however, I was assailed by gnawing doubts.

My friend, the Persian, had given an indication of what I could expect. The person who had encompassed my capture must obviously be a free-booter, and outside the ordinary run of slavers. He had not gone afar for his booty, but had even descended, in the case of the Persian, to net one who was already a slave. Undoubtedly, the unsettled state of the country had made this possible. It also suggested that he was not a local man, and that his business over, he would move rapidly to fresh pastures.

Would such a man have either the intelligence or the patience to deal with paper? My goods—such as had not been despatched to Bokhara and from thence on to Bombay—he would regard as his perquisite. Would these satisfy him? I doubted it. Would he allow me to devise some scheme whereby I could secure sufficient cash from Bombay to purchase my liberty? I doubted this also.

When I was brought face to face with this slaver, I realised that I might have saved myself the mental agony of useless surmise.

The name under which he then laboured was Abdul Rezak, but there was such a strong Mongolian cast to his ill-used countenance that I suspected his real name should be something like Ta Ch'ing

Shan. The man, however, always remained something of a mystery, though to judge by the ease with which he could assimilate one set of customs and disregard another I should say that he had many diverse breeds in his make-up. The man was a mongrel, with all the blustering aggressiveness of his type.

It was the next afternoon that I first made the acquaintance of Abdul Rezak. The brass water bowl had twice been on its rounds since my first encounter with it, and I had neither eaten nor drank. It was a bitterly cold day, and I thanked Allah for my warm underwear—a thick coat would have been filched from me long ere this—when we were required to rise from our position on the floor of that dismal apartment, and seek the open. There we were roughly thrust into line, and Abdul Rezak strutted along, punching a man here to observe his reactions, pinching another there to feel his muscles, and leering coldly in the faces of all.

He came to me, and halted. He grinned at me complacently.

“Big—well-matured—not too soft.”

He tipped off my various points as if I were a horse.

“Are you,” I demanded, “the person responsible for this outrage?”

He grinned at me afresh, and would have passed on.

Desperately, I stepped out of the line, and followed.

“Stay,” I called. “I am no mere underling to be treated like this!”

Abdul Rezak stopped in his stride, and lifted an eye-lid to one of his men. A lash curled round my ankles, and bit into my shins, and I was forced back.

Nonchalantly, Abdul Rezak completed his inspection of the line. Slowly, he returned to me.

"I have been through your baggage," he said. His tone was aggravatingly conventional. "There are a number of carpets which are useless to me, and there is a wallet with papers and remarkably little money. You have no money on your person—I have seen to that—so, what is there that you can say?" He sneered, and spat his contempt.

"Those papers," I replied with as much spirit as I could summon, "represent money. Allow me to negotiate them, and you will not be the loser."

He considered the situation.

"The papers are worth money, you say. Can you negotiate them in twenty-four hours?"

My heart sank. Wildly I explained that weeks would have to transpire before I could obtain money from Bombay. It would be necessary, I added, to arrange for an overdraft on the goods held by the bank, but—all this was beyond him.

Again he spat, and again a lash curled round my calves, directed there by an enthusiastic underling, and Abdul slouched off.

With the lash ever menacing, we were hustled off to the fair ground, and I can say that my education then began. Had I had my eyes opened before, I should have realised that the fair was there

merely as a transparent cloak to this business of buying and selling humans. I saw at once the reason why so little has been heard of slavery in recent years, for even in Bokhara there had grown up a cynical regard for the conventions, and slavery was a subject which was not openly mentioned.

We were halted near a rostrum. The merchants around shouted their wares, and the attention we received was scant. Apparently, this was the custom.

"Lovely food! Lovely food," shrieked a long-robed shaven-headed man in my ear, offering for the equivalent of a penny a mass of fish set out in jelly.

A burly young Turkoman near the booth recommended the fish to a passing Kherghiz woman.

Two youths, after a hectic ride on the garishly painted dragons of a crude and crazy roundabout, came to celebrate the occasion of the fair by quaffing glasses of highly-spiced lemonade. An altercation ensued between the youths and the woman serving the drink. Ordinarily, as the potion is served in the hills, slices of lemon float on the top of the liquid. The vendor was parsimonious, and these were missing.

The youths, flushed with the excitement of their ride, demurred strongly, but an elderly female in the offing jeered at them, and advised them to seek the communion of the love-birds and the fortune-telling gypsies.

Just behind me stood a man on an upturned barrow. He balanced himself on this, first on one hand;

then on the other. All the while he told the world that he was the best acrobat in the land.

In the midst of this din one or other of us was required to mount the rostrum. Whispers would go round, and an individual would be detached. I noticed that it was the women for whom there were the most persistent enquiries.

I could see also that Abdul was far from pleased. Bidding was slack, and interest in human merchandise seemed to be waning.

I heard more than one person round on him when he importuned.

"Times are changing," I heard it said. "These Soviets uplift the peasant and grind down the merchant and the landholder. It is not safe to buy slaves. Soon—and they may all be freed."

After hours of waiting, hours when my slightest movement was rewarded by an intimidatory prod or a surreptitious curl of the whip, I, too, was required to mount the rostrum.

The rostrum, I might add, was the tumble-down public water cistern, and three broken steps led to its eminence.

I remained there, gazing blankly at the passing crowds for some ten or fifteen minutes, but I might have been part of the cistern for all the interest evinced.

Curtly I was told to stand down, and another took my place.

Three times during the course of the day I was exposed on the rostrum, and then it was that an aged Turkoman came and prodded me in the ribs. He

made me grunt, but the man with the whip quickly silenced me.

The Turkoman approached Abdul, and withdrew a silk handkerchief. Their hands met under its cover, and it was thus wise that they negotiated their deal.

The argument which ensued was hot and long. There was a cleavage of opinion as to whether I should change hands for the equivalent of ten pounds or four.

In the end the Turkoman offered two pounds and a horse. There was further argument, which ended with the Turkoman retiring to produce the animal.

In the interim, I was required to step down.

Eventually, the horse appeared, and I felt far from flattered. Abdul, for his part, lost his temper. He told the Turkoman in the roundest terms just what he thought of him, his father, his mother, his grandparents and sundry other relations. He had got to cousins twice or thrice removed, when the Turkoman moved off.

Still cursing, Abdul declared that he would retain me for himself. These hooligans, he said, did not appreciate a fully-formed and robust man when they saw one.

Still I was required listlessly to stand there while the selling and bartering proceeded, the life of the fair roaring its tumultuous way around me.

Frequently the scene around me would change as booth-owners packed up and others took their place.

Sometimes the roar of a mangy caged lioness would attract the attention of the hordes of children



UZBEK FARMERS DELIVERING WHEAT AT A CENTRAL ASIAN MARKET
Another corner of a bazaar in an adjoining area of Turkomen and Uzbek
encampments near the Slave-market towns in Turkistan

who rushed pell-mell between the desert gypsy carts assembled on the ground. At other times there would be a rush for the roundabouts, now aglow with dozens of gaily coloured lanterns lighted with diminutive candles.

Most of the children sucked the sticky Bokharan toffees. A goodly number carried the crude wooden toys fashioned in the shape of camels and horses which woodworkers seem able to fashion with a few deft slashes of the knife. The adults sucked and tore at huge slices of melon.

A dreamy-eyed fortune teller came near and did a good trade. For the price of a penny one could have his fortune told up to the period of marriage. Beyond that time the price leaped.

When the fortune-teller disappeared, brazen-lunged men swooped down on the clearing, and they carried fighting cocks under their arms.

"To the cockfight. To the cockfight," they yelled. "Come, my young ones; my brave ones, my sweet one. . . ."

The place became thronged, and I was much jostled. A cock was thrown into the arena, and a cry rose from the spectators. The rival parties shouted, and hoarsely exclaimed their bets.

"Fight. Fight!" they screamed. "Drive out the interloper as our forefathers drove out the Russians!"

Occasionally a too robust partisan fell foul of another, and there was an immediate flare-up and an impromptu wrestling match.

None of the contests between the cocks lasted more than six minutes. The betting which ensued was

carried on in a curious manner. It seemed that there had been a *firman* against gambling in the old days, and here again the cynical had devised a transparent cloak.

A man would sell a whip, a saddle, or a walking stick for ten, twenty, thirty times its value to a man whose avocation was obviously that of "bookie." The surplus of the real value of the article was "on the bird." More than once I saw the most curious transactions. I wonder what would be said in the Royal enclosure at Ascot if a punter placed his bet on the strength of a whip and the bookie paid out with a camel!

While watching this scene I received a prod. Abdul was packing up. He called his womenfolk about him, and the thongs at my wrists were untied. The man with the whip pointed significantly at a pistol in his belt, and I nodded my understanding.

One of the women, obviously fatigued by the pleasures of the fair, thrust her infant into my arms. The child stirred, looked up at me, and expressed its violent displeasure. It clawed wildly with its hands, and tore savagely at my cheeks.

With a shrill expression the woman snatched back her child, and a young goat took its place. Evidently, I was required to be a beast of burden, and if I could not be trusted as a nurse, feminine method at least insisted that I should be useful.

Thuswise we trudged beyond the area of the fair and through the outskirts of the village. We came at length to an encampment where, with other camels, I saw those that I had hired in Bokhara. Near them

were the bales, readily recognisable, which contained so many of my rugs.

Of the camels I had taken 'from Bokhara eleven remained with me when I was captured. The others had been sent back from time to time in twos and threes with consignments for despatch to Bombay.

Still, there remained sufficient for me poignantly to realise how scurvy was the reward handed out to me by Fate. Here was I, contemplating goods which were mine, or would have been in the fullness of time, yet I was trudging along as a goatsherd at the behest of a woman. Behind the woman, it was true, was a bandit with a whip, and to reinforce the whip was a pistol.

I wondered whether the weapon, whose ornate ivory butt I had glimpsed, could really fire.

I decided that I would defer my enquiries.

Abdul still had my papers. He might despise them, and refuse to allow me to negotiate them. Still, they represented my all. Until I had secured possession of them, my best course was to turn the other cheek.

CHAPTER VII

I MAKE A BARGAIN

APPROACHING the encampment, I was assailed by a dozen clamouring Mongol dogs. They rushed at me as with intent to tear me to pieces with their ferocious teeth, but a child with the party—a boy of no more than five—seized a switch and belaboured them. They fell away, snarling and yapping.

In the towns and cities of Central Asia, dogs are apt to become little better than curs. They are kicked and stoned, and forced to pick up their food from the garbage heaps. The caravan dogs, on the other hand, are trained to be fighters, and they are carefully tended and fed.

Abdul, I was later to discover, was very proud of his dogs and had, in fact, secured them from Kuei-hua, of the noted dog firm of Ta Sheng K'uei, which has been noted for its fighting dogs throughout Mongolia and large tracts of China for some hundreds of years. This firm was one of the principal in the trade of caravans. It could supply the best horses, the best dogs, and the best camels. It had ramifications everywhere throughout Central Asia, and its word was its bond. Its credit was good over thousands of miles of territory, and its status can best be likened to one of the old chartered companies of England. It was not, even in its prime, ever as large as the

East India Company. I should say that it closely approximated to the position held by the Hudson's Bay Company of the present day.

It had immense wealth, most of which was secured on tribal lands, and many rich Mongol families were deeply in its debt. That was well as long as the Czars ruled at St. Petersburg, but since the time of which I am writing, Soviet principles have penetrated into Mongolia and this firm is now but a remnant of its former self. The Soviet cancelled all its debts, the holdings upon tribal lands were disregarded, and Ta Sheng K'uei lost its money.

In likening this firm to the Hudson's Bay Company I perhaps made a happy choice, because the British concern still uses dog sleighs to keep in touch with many of its outposts. Ta Sheng K'uei bred special dogs to accompany caravans in order to keep apprised of the state of widely scattered markets. Messages would be attached to the collars of these dogs, and they would travel tremendous distances back to the firm's headquarters, fighting their way through packs of other dogs, and scarcely stopping for rest until the message was delivered. So carefully were these dogs bred, and so highly were they prized, that the firm maintained special ledgers in which the name of every dog was entered. A percentage of all profits was put aside for dog-breeding, and the result was an animal which could command the highest prices throughout Central Asia. Such were the dogs which rushed at me. I learned to treat these animals with the greatest respect, because it was long before they would accept me.

Soon after I unwillingly joined Abdul, however, one of the bitches pupped. One youngster took my eye, and I carried it for many a long mile, the bitch following me the while with her fierce, maternal eye. It was this bitch, however, who turned the pack in my favour. Their growls on my approach were met with fiercer growls and bared fangs on her part. She intimidated the rest into accepting me. Once I had secured their confidence I could do more with them than their owner, which annoyed Abdul.

However, again I run on.

I was ushered to Abdul's tent in the encampment, and again I had a surprise. I have said that the man had many Mongolian traits. He had more or less completely assimilated the tent customs of the nomad—customs which in themselves had been borrowed in the long ago from the Mongols. Bearing a Moslem name such as his—a name of Persian extraction—this wholehearted devotion to customs outside the Mohammedan orbit was a continual source of wonder to me.

Always on the right of the entrance to the tent were stacked the cooking utensils. On the left were the water baskets and camel gear.

As we approached the door of the tent, the man with the lash gave me a push which precipitated me inside. I wondered at the cause of this unnecessary aggression, but when I saw him throw his whip into the tent before he himself entered, I understood. He wished to make certain that I was within the tent before discarding his whip, for here was another Mongolian custom. It is considered the worst kind

of discourtesy to enter the tent of another carrying a whip. Always is it thrown in.

This, I suppose, is akin to the English custom of shaking hands which, in its inception, at least assured that the right hand of each person was disengaged from a sword hilt, and the custom, usual elsewhere, of throwing down one's arms as a preliminary to friendly converse.

My jailor was carrying a small lash, and not an ordinary camel whip. These latter are the most devilish instruments, and I can well understand a custom which requires that they should be placed out of harm's way before making a call upon a neighbour.

The lashes of these whips, which are used for the herding of camels, are never less than twelve feet long and are made of plaited camel hide. I never succeeded in cracking one, principally, I suppose, because I never had my mind on my job. I was too concerned in retaining my ears, for these lashes will bite through human flesh as easily as a razor blade.

Abdul was sitting before a fire when I entered. He took little note of me for a while. Then he grunted.

"Your name?" he demanded.

I told him.

"You say that you are a merchant?"

I nodded.

"Then it should be easy for you to procure money?"

I explained that money could indeed be obtained, but that it would require time, and ready access to my papers.

I saw him screw up his mouth into a vicious smile.

"Papers!" he repeated. "Papers!" He sniffed his disdain.

He was clearly suspicious, and his following words confirmed this.

"You think that I have been idle?" There was an ugly sneer behind the query.

I could do nothing more than shrug my shoulders.

"I have shown these papers to men in the bazaars, and they refuse to advance a penny on them. You say they are valuable. I say that they are worthless."

I tried to explain that the nature of my business had required that my documents should be worthless to anyone but me, but such flights into the realms of finance were beyond his powers of reasoning. He just sat there, grinning his disbelief, and allowing me to talk. I came to a stop, realising the hopelessness of my task.

"You are a man from the south," he said. "You are one of those who would skin the nose from a Jew. You think that it is easy to get the better of a simple tent dweller. . . ."

Gravely I expostulated.

"Because you have a bundle of papers which the merchants of the bazaar deride and declare useless, you think to pull the hair over the eyes of one who cannot read?"

I fell silent. It seemed useless to argue with one who was so firmly convinced that I was a rogue.

"You think to hoodwink me with these papers, in order that you may secure your freedom at little cost?"

I continued mute.

"I did not sell you to that Turkoman," he went on, "because the fool is tied to his land. I am not so tied, and we leave with the dawn. I have decided that you shall leave with me. For your own sake I hope that you are as fit as you seem, for we go a long march."

I found my tongue.

"I am not a merchant of Central Asia," I said. "There is little that I can do for you that could not be done by an ordinary servant or camel man. Indeed, such men could be of more assistance, for I am unlearned in these things. Is it not better that you should arrange that I obtain money to pay for a man to take my place?"

"We march," he returned. "There is no time for dalliance."

"But, these things can always be arranged. You must have friends here. I could remain with them until the money is paid. Already you have my camels and my goods. All I ask is that I be given my papers. Without them I cannot secure the money."

"Another trick of the south?"

He tugged the documents from his robe, and held the precious papers tantalisingly before my eyes.

"Worthless," he muttered, angrily, "and you would seek to bargain with me!"

With a petulant gesture he threw them from him, and they fell dangerously near the edge of the fire. With a cry, I rushed forward to retrieve them, but with a lunge of his foot, he kicked them from beyond my grasp into the dark recesses of the tent.

"Not so worthless, perhaps!"

He gazed at me, and pondered. He came to a decision.

"We still march," he said, "and you march with me. Let me tell you that you will be well guarded, and that any attempt to escape will bring a camel whip round your shoulders. It is my custom," he added mockingly, "to see that all newcomers get a taste of the whip whether they behave themselves or not. I have found that this makes for amity and accord. After ten days or more the most aggressive jump to my word!"

Perhaps he could sense the thoughts pulsing through my mind.

"No," he said, showing his teeth, "I should not attempt to break camp to-night. You have made acquaintance with the dogs—they are not the ordinary village curs. One step beyond the blanket which will be given you, and—they will tear you to pieces."

He nodded to my jailor, and the man caught me roughly by the arm. Angrily, I shook him off, for I still wanted those papers.

Abdul nodded again, and the man stooped to the ground and retrieved his whip. He curled it horribly round my calves.

I held up my hand to command attention, though the pain of the lash made me sick.

"You will not bargain me my freedom," I exclaimed. "Will you bargain something else?"

Abdul raised his eyebrows suspiciously.

"What is it?" he growled.

"You have my goods, and you have my camels. They are of value. You have kicked away my despised papers. Will you return them to me?"

"I will not!" He was emphatic.

"Then," I broke in desperately, "will you bargain this way? In return for your promise to keep them safely I will render you unquestioned service. . . ."

"So, you are afraid of the lash?" His lips curled.

I ignored the jibe, and pressed home my point.

"Is it a bargain?"

"I am to keep the papers safely, and—you will make no attempt to escape . . .?"

I nodded.

Abdul fell silent.

Believing the interview over, my jailor nudged me. When I remained immobile under his promptings he raised his lash.

With a snarl Abdul bade him desist.

I had gained my point, and scoundrel though Abdul was, I believed that he would keep to his side of the bargain.

I had appealed to the man's cunning and to his instinctive distrust. Well aware that it was almost impossible for me to escape, he had nothing to lose and much to gain in willing service if he retained my papers and did not throw them lightly away. I had broken down his incredulity and had at last made him realise that these documents meant something. Because of his natural cupidity, he would guard them.

If I was to be this man's slave, I had now something to scheme for, over and above mere freedom.

I admit that, for my own part, I intended to keep my part of the bargain only as long as it took me to procure the papers, and encompass my escape.

I had achieved, too, a victory of no small moment. I had, or believed I had, escaped persistent and consistent lashing. Abdul believed that he had a hold over me as long as he retained possession of my papers.

Almost, as I snuggled into my camel hair blanket, I had a light heart. Had I known all that was to come to me before I was again to walk forth a free being, I might have been less elated. Almost might I have been tempted to forgo my papers and seek to return to India by braving Abdul's hounds and facing a long and arduous journey, devoid of money and the wherewithal with which to secure food and means of transport.

It was, I discovered next morning, after I had eased my way from the attentions of the dogs and had performed not very satisfactory ablutions, Abdul's intention to make for the district of Qilat, the favourite stronghold of the famous Nadir Shah and the place where he had intended to deposit his fabulous treasures.

No wonder he had spoken of a long march! It was a journey of some four hundred miles. I could see by the manner in which the camels were being loaded that it was to be a quick march, and this was likely to add to its unpleasantness. Each man, I noticed, had a camel to himself, and the pack animals were not called upon to carry more than

roughly 270 lbs, which is a comparatively light burden for a camel.

It was Abdul's invariable custom, I was to learn, to commence the march soon after sunrise. We would keep going until sunset when men, who took it in turns to perform the task, grazed the camels until midnight, if there was anything upon which they could graze. Thereafter they were made to kneel for a few hours to rest themselves. I mention this to indicate that Abdul was a man of extraordinary character. There is a well-accepted belief among camel men that camels will not graze in the dark, and that the best marching hours are the late afternoon and the early part of the night. In the majority of caravans, the grazing hours are from dawn until just after noon. Actually, of course, so far from refusing to graze at night camels will often leave their tetherings and amble off in search of food. Camel customs die hard.

Abdul, however, was anxious to get away, and quickly to put distance between himself and the district of Samarkhand. He had been up to all kinds of tricks. He had been freebooting, and had not cared whom he pillaged. He had snapped up small caravans such as mine, and dozens of individuals had been roped into his net, and sold. There was considerable bad feeling, and the strength of his party only saved him from immediate reprisals. He feared a coalescing on the part of some of the aggrieved, and was anxious to get going while the going was good. This was one of the reasons why I was accommodated with a camel. Had Abdul

more leisure, he would have delighted in seeing me walk or run until I dropped. This is no mere surmise. I saw him do this to others at not a very much later date.

I was one of the few men in the party who remained unarmed. In all there were some fifty males, quite a number of whom had been taken, as I had been, in previous expeditions. For the main part these men, in return for a grotesque semblance of liberty—for they would have been followed and hounded to their death had they made any attempt at escape—had thrown in their lot with Abdul and in certain cases, where they had earned the trust, were armed and added to the fighters. Those who were without arms—those, in other words, whom Abdul had reason to distrust, were required to do all the menial tasks.

Abdul was wily, and I could not but admire his system. There was always an incentive to become one of the accepted, for apart from the escape from uncongenial labour which it afforded, it meant that one received a share—a very small share—in the proceeds of freebooting—a share which Abdul was at length pleased to receive back in his coffers in return for complete freedom. Somehow or another this extraordinary arrangement seemed to work. Abdul certainly possessed some valiant fighters, and never once did I see one of his men snap a pistol at him. As for me, he never gave me the chance.

I found that my task was that of camel herder. I was provided with one of those long whips which, in my hands, was worse than useless, and the man

told off to assist me in the work had invariably to do most of the herding. Always had this second man, who was changed every night, a pistol stuck in his middle.

The chances of my deserting in the country over which we traversed were so remote as to be nil, but Abdul believed in retiring with a mind free of worry. This task of camel herding meant that I obtained remarkably little sleep. There were the long and exhausting rides during the day, a continual vigilance with the camels until well after midnight, then frequently a stumbling pilgrimage after some rover in the few hours that remained until dawn. Perhaps this, too, was part of the system. It certainly wore me down. The life made me virile and hard, but there were times when I would have given all I possessed, which unfortunately was nothing, for a full cycle of the clock between comforting European sheets.

It was on the fifth or sixth day of our march that there came an alteration in the usual routine. Instead of continuing until sunset, we halted soon after noon. The fires which were lighted were carefully tended. Never for a moment were they left, and I noticed that there was an entire absence of smoke. There was something in the wind. When I asked what was forthcoming, I was told curtly to mind my own business.

We had left the neighbourhood of Samarkhand remarkably short of foodstuffs. No ordinary caravan would have dared to travel so light. But—Abdul was no ordinary person. He intended, so I discovered

a few hours later, not only to replenish his larders, but to throw in a little honest filibustering *en route*.

Incidentally, I might add, Abdul never looked upon his achievements as anything but praiseworthy. Never once did he entertain the thought that he was indulging in anything criminal. I don't suppose it would have deterred him for one moment if he had. Life for him was one glorious adventure. According to his own lights, he was strictly honourable.

Soon after midnight we started out, and Abdul gave me my first insight into his methods. Well before dawn we came up to a small walled village where, in perfect silence, we secreted ourselves. My part was to remain with the camels and the women. I was enjoined to keep each animal quietly grazing, and to allow none to sink to its knees. Obviously, Abdul was for a quick get-away.

I watched the men, led by Abdul, sneak off to a spot near the village gate where they lost themselves in the gloom. I could see them no better when the light gradually broke, for they were adepts at concealment.

Not long afterwards the gate was swung open, and the unsuspecting inhabitants began to emerge, some with crude agricultural implements, and others driving cattle.

I did not see Abdul give the signal, but there must have been something which made for concerted action, for the camel men suddenly appeared from their lurking place, and all was soon indescribable confusion. Men, women and children were seized, and rapidly bound with their hands behind them.

Some of the men who resisted were cut down. Not a shot was fired in that initial encounter. All was done with amazing celerity.

A detachment of the men broke away from the main body, and began shepherding the screaming captives toward the camels. The rest charged in through the village gate before the majority of the inhabitants could have taken up the alarm.

In five or ten minutes they came out at the run. They were leading some half dozen likely looking horses, and a couple of bulls. The men with the bulls knew their job. They had hitched nooses round the animals' snouts, and these were twisted taut. Behind each bull was a second man. He had a firm grip of the tail, which he twisted savagely. Mad with pain the bulls needed little urging, but if they did endeavour to deviate from the course which their captors intended them to take, the man at the tail swung the butt of his musket between the rear legs of the animal, and the bull had something more important to think about than a mere matter of direction.

Abdul came up at a run, and I could see that he was looking well pleased. The curved sabre which he wore on these occasions was splashed with blood, and he took quick stock of the position.

Hardly a word was passed, for each man seemed to know his job. Four men acted as a sort of rear-guard, and whenever there was movement at the village gate, they fired.

Others attended to the bulls, which were killed and hacked asunder at lightning speed, and Abdul himself looked over the captives.

He went up to each, and tore at their clothes. In the case of the men it was easy. He had only to tug at a pyjama string, and the man's voluminous trousers descended in the very abnegation of modesty. No man can feel really dressed in a diminutive waistcoat which was never made to button.

With the women it was more difficult. True, their garments were hardly more complicated, but they added a convulsive wriggling to a lurid catechism of Abdul's character which he appeared to find highly diverting. In any event, their disrobing was not in every case so theatrically illuminating. In most instances, it was conducted piecemeal, a handful of material at a time.

Although Abdul obviously regarded this as a pleasant diversion, he lost remarkably little time. It required but a few moments before these unfortunate people were reduced to their skins.

With an accomplished hand which had patently been on the job before, Abdul conducted a more personal inspection. The half a dozen horses had turned out to be seven, and Abdul was making a selection of captives. He ordered four men and three girls of the ages of fourteen to fifteen to stand on one side. The others, he contemptuously ordered to be released.

Standing there without clothing, they did not immediately depart. The women were wailing, and no doubt wishing their hands were larger. The men looked shamefaced, and angry. I could not help thinking that the females comported themselves the better. Their sense of decorum might have been

outraged, but at least they did not look foolish. They had the art of fitting into the picture. In this battle of contours the men were at a disadvantage.

The women set up a further wailing and screaming when they saw what was afoot and the seven captives, still without raiment, were led to the horses.

One aged woman rushed at Abdul, scratching and clawing, hysterically demanding the release of her son. One talon caught him just below the left eye, and cleaved a deep furrow down his cheek to his chin.

He pushed her angrily backwards, but she returned to the attack.

He thrust forth a hand, and caught at a pendant breast. He twisted it cruelly, and the crone subsided, groaning and sobbing. One of the rejected men moved a pace forward, his eyes darkly glowering, and his chin projecting menacingly.

Abdul looked up, and smiled tauntingly. His eyes held out a caustic invitation. The unfortunate fellow hesitated for a split second, and one could see his emotions mirrored in his face. He pulled together his courage, and launched his body forward. Abdul coolly stepped aside, snatched his pistol from his robe, pulled the trigger with the muzzle touching the man's bare flesh, and the brave fellow went down. He gave a sort of hollow grunt, twisted round in a circle on the ground, his legs threshing, then lay still.

With a nonchalant wave of his arm, Abdul indicated action.

Abdul caught my eye.

"When we mount," he said, "you remain."

With a nod of his head, he indicated the four men maintaining a desultory fire on the village gate.

"You will tend their camels, and your own. When they fall back, you will ride with them."

Without waiting for me to reply—perhaps none was needed in the circumstances—he gave the order to mount. The seven captives were placed on the horses, their feet were loosely but securely tied beneath the animals' bellies, and their hands were momentarily released. Instead of the tight bonds which bound them behind their backs, loose camel thongs, cunningly twisted, were applied to their wrists and attached to those which bound their feet. This allowed their hands a certain amount of movement, and they were enabled to clutch the horses' manes. Indeed, they had every incentive to do so, for at Abdul's word the lightly laden camels were goaded into a lumbering gallop. To have done otherwise than to have hung on would have spelt a ghastly death by being dragged at the heels of frightened horses.

The rearguard gave our main body about half an hour's start before they came running for their camels. We, too, went away at speed. We were not pursued, perhaps because we had taken the best horses the village possessed, but more likely because the villagers thought it expedient to be philosophical.

There was no point in further antagonising a well-equipped and well-mounted band, the exact numbers

of which they were probably quite unaware. Also, from their point of view, they had got off lightly.

Abdul always considered himself a minor Robin Hood.

He could, of course, quite easily have fired the village.

CHAPTER VIII

KIMAT

It was, of course, the lynx-eyed Abdul who first observed, notwithstanding the scantiness of fare when the meat ration was excluded, that I persistently rejected the flesh portion of the food prepared by the caravan cook.

I can perhaps best describe our cook's methods as straight-forward. He would seize a quantity of meat, already maltreated in its unscientific killing, and hack at it like a sadist. Not for him was that oft-heard English refrain, "the nearer the bone the sweeter the flesh." If there was a bone, his one purpose in life was to bring it to the surface. He cut away all the flesh, and then threw this, with the bones, into a cauldron and boiled the mess for as many hours as we encamped.

This was rough and ready treatment which I might not have despised, but he was wont to "flavour" the concoction by adding the entire contents of the stomach. He considered that this imparted strength and stamina to those who partook.

I am not naturally squeamish, but there are certain things which are not done. Had there been an element of cleanliness attaching to the operation I would have shut my eyes and held myself lucky

to be receiving such nourishing fare, but there was none. The cook was strong on "flavour."

I had made up to the cook, and had induced him from time to time to give me pieces of meat for my own consumption. These I had cooked in more civilised fashion, and Abdul began to take notice. He was, as I was beginning to discover, one who had an affection for his stomach. He became quite conversational.

"I see that you are something of a cook!"

He sniffed appreciatively at the chop which I had grilled over the embers of a small fire.

I made a deprecating noise, but Abdul still sniffed.

"You do not appreciate our cook's efforts?"

I had to proceed warily, for Abdul could be exceedingly touchy. It was not for me to belittle his cook. He probably thought the world of him.

Diffidently I explained that the cook had methods which I, as a Moslem, found it difficult to entertain. That, I said, was the reason why I endeavoured, wherever possible, to cook my own meat.

Abdul waxed confidential. He assured me that he, too, had noticed the cook and his ways, and as a Moslem, had long eaten his meat with repugnance.

As a Moslem! It was with difficulty that I restrained the smile that kept quivering at my lips.

Abdul was no Moslem. He was a chameleon. He would stand out righteously for some Moslem principle one minute and quaff deeply at the fiery, caravan spirits the next. I had seen Abdul raging drunk, and his reference to repugnance amused me.

"Yes," he went on, still sniffing, "you shall be cook!"

My astonishment must have given him pause, for he immediately bridled.

"You can't say that you are no cook. That meat smells good!"

Rapidly, I explained that I might succeed in rendering edible a small piece of meat, but that the preparation of large quantities of food was beyond me. I was reluctant even to prepare a complete meal for myself.

He hesitated. He reached down, removed my chop from the bent metal skewer upon which it was poised, and ate. He seemed satisfied.

"You shall cook for me and my family," he said with finality. "The cook can continue to prepare food for the rest."

"But," I explained, "there are other things beside meat. They are an absolute mystery to me."

"You shall have Kimat to assist you." He stalked off.

Kimat, I might mention, was one of the girls captured in the raid. She, in common with the rest of the captives, had speedily thrown off her terror, and seemed tolerably content.

At the halt following the raid, and when the distance was too great for the captives to consider a break-away on foot, clothing was found for them from the stores.

There was some wailing and gnashing of teeth that night, and the lash had been in evidence, but the captives had soon brightened up, and did not

seem unduly perturbed at the thought of being sold to some hard taskmaster.

Later I spoke to Abdul in respect of this, and he laughed scornfully at my ignorance.

The vast majority of those taken, he assured me, were positively glad. He pictured their condition in their home villages—ill-clad, ill-nourished; nothing but drudgery and the continual fear of famine—and contrasted it with the life of the average slave. He described slavery in Bokhara and Khiva as a blessing of considerable value, and one which was highly regarded. It was true, he added, that those who could not afford a ransom continued as the property of their owners for an indefinite period; that many were employed as agricultural labourers, but the majority, always provided they behaved with circumspection, were not beaten, they had a sufficiency of food and clothing and, on the whole, enjoyed a greater security of life and limb than they did in their own villages.

He warmed to his subject. So mild, he insisted, was the servitude to which these people were subjected, that those who were clever and industrious found means, by carrying on petty trade—trade in which they were encouraged by their masters—to raise sufficient money to buy their freedom within ten or twenty years. Frequently, too, he added, this petty trading led to the exploration of other avenues, and from these small beginnings slaves would rise to be big merchants with large dealings and honest repute. More often than not, he continued with the suspicion of a leer, these successful ex-slaves were

found trafficking in the very trade which I seemed to consider so dreadful.

He told me of cases where slaves were bought in the first instance by rich farmers. Often, such slaves were given permission to cultivate a small patch of land on which they grew melons or other fruit for sale. Thus, in the course of time, they were able to garner sufficient money to purchase their freedom. This they would carry before their master, and demand their liberty. In no case was it refused. Often, Abdul assured me, when a particular slave had given continued satisfaction, a large part of the purchase money was remitted. When such a transaction took place, the master gave the slave a paper declaring that he had bought his freedom.

In a sense I knew that there was a substratum of truth in what Abdul said, but he never convinced me that these unfortunates *liked* being forcibly dragged from their homes as he would have me believe. I knew, of course, that there are many ex-slaves in Bokhara, many of them rich men. There are exceptions to every rule.

When I found myself appointed cook to the household, as it were, I was optimistic enough to assume that I should be excused my task of herding. I was mistaken. Evidently Abdul intended that his rosy picture of slavery should be applied strictly in the abstract.

After a time I also began to suspect his motives in respect to Kimat, the assistant he had given me. She was a very comely maiden, and Abdul, who **had** a roving eye, had no illusions as to her charms. She



ONE OF THE BABIS IN OUR CARAVAN



was a veritable chatterbox, and as she performed her tasks she kept up a continual monologue about the life in her village, the frequent periods when there was no food, and the paucity of clothing which was the lot of the females. The village men, she informed me with her laughing eyes, were "No Good." They had no idea how a woman craved for silks, and for ornaments.

Women, I am afraid, are the same the world over.

By some mischance she had done rather well out of the lottery which governed the parceling out of clothing from the caravan stores, and she preened herself, walked with a confident air, and generally put it across the other women.

I asked her more than once if she did not ache to return to her village, and her answer was a scornful and disdainful, "Pshaw!" It was a near equivalent to that tearing noise made by the gamins of English cities which, I believe, is designated a "Raspberry."

No, Kimat was more than resigned to her lot. She revelled in it, and when Abdul began to purr around our culinary efforts, she drooped a shrewd, maidenly eye, and her chatter became interspersed with song. She was a wayward wench.

Having got Abdul where she wanted him, she began to slack, and I found that in addition to my other duties I was becoming the scullion as well as the cook.

When I upbraided her, she became arch.

When I threatened to beat her with a switch, she said she would tell Abdul that I had designs on her modesty.

When I said that *I* would tell Abdul that she was no better than she should be, she smiled aggravatingly, and seemed delighted with the idea.

When my clientele expanded so as to include one Bans Kellah, who was Abdul's second-in-command, I knew that there was going to be trouble with this hoyden, because I had seen Bans Kellah eat. He was always one who scooped for the "flavour" imparted by the caravan cook, and my concoctions he must have found devastatingly insipid.

He would come around, however, munch the food with a much-evident relish, and he ogled Kimat. Kimat ogled back, and she had two strings to her bow.

When the master and his principal lieutenant are urged toward the same woman, and when this woman enters with zest into the game, an explosion is inevitable sooner or later.

An indication of trouble to come was evidenced some days later. We were then travelling easily, Abdul being well beyond the range of any who might wish to try conclusions with him, and those ahead put up a number of wild hog which were feeding in a marshy hollow.

Several of the camel men immediately forged ahead, and cut off the animals' escape, and Abdul called for the captured horses and for spears.

Abdul and Bans Kellah were among those who mounted, and by the manner of their riding it was easy to see that they were out to give Kimat an exhibition of their skill.

Abdul and Bans Kellah selected a hog larger than

the rest and they rode at the beast full tilt, chivvying it with their spears and cutting at it with their swords. The hog galloped surlily along, seeking to rejoin its companions. Every now and again it turned, and sought to rip open a horse's belly with its tusks, but the horses were agile. As a spectacle, I think the hog had it, for neither the spears nor the swords seemed to make much impression upon its hide, and I could not help thinking how different and how much more efficient was the pig-sticking I had witnessed in India.

It appeared to me that the hog must eventually escape in the marsh. Abdul went careering along, stabbing ineffectively with his spear, when Bans Kellah drew away to one side. He wheeled, rode at the hog just as it was disappearing into the coarse grass, and turned his horse rapidly round with mere knee pressure. The horse seemed to know what was required, for it lashed out with its heels, and caught the hog on the head. It tumbled over, dead on the spot, and Bans stood to one side, well pleased, throwing a covert glance at Kimat the while to make certain that she had taken note of his exhibition.

Abdul glanced at the dead pig, and glowered. He looked up at Bans, and snarled. He intercepted a glance which Bans was exchanging with Kimat, and stalked off to his camel.

The little drama was working out well. Kimat was in her element. She had missed none of the by-play. She had two men at each other's throats for the favour of her smile.

As soon as the pig was toppled over, sundry of the men dismounted and made passes at it with their swords. I noticed, however, that they could not even divide the hair, let alone penetrate the skin. This was an eloquent tribute to the toughness of its hide.

I asked some of the camel men later in the day why they took so much trouble in putting an animal to death—an animal which could serve no useful purpose as they were unable to eat it.

They replied: "Is he not an enemy?"

"Must we not always put our enemies to death?"

This, of course, was all remarkably naïve, and I had my suspicions regarding the disposal of the flesh. I am tolerably certain that that night the Mongolian trait came out strongly in Abdul, and that there was a little of the hog that went untasted. I was more than relieved than ever that I had secured my freedom from the communal flesh-pot.

It was not long before our vicious little threesome became a foursome. Abdul had a huge wife named Umid, and she began to take an interest in the game.

From the outset it was obvious that she did not like Kimat, but then, perhaps, she was prejudiced.

She became suspicious when Abdul came snooping round my fires. Her suspicions were confirmed from her elevation on a camel when she saw enacted the comedy of the hog.

That evening, as I was preparing the dish, she took it into her head to make some quiet investigations. She came padding round, and stood behind me and

Kimat for some minutes, quite motionless. There was nothing to do but to ignore her presence, and to keep on working, for it was not my place to speak to her. As for Kimat, I could see that she was thoroughly uncomfortable. Now and again she gave a little shiver.

Normally Umid was a genial creature, as many over-stout women are, but I could sense her bulk behind me, and I knew that she was not kindly disposed.

It was she who broke the silence. She addressed Kimat like a pre-revolutionary French aristocrat having stilted converse with a menial.

"Slave," she said harshly. "Get to my tent."

She despatched her one small errand, and then addressed herself to me. I stood up.

"Aren't you a man?" she asked me, and there was a needle thrust in her biting sarcasm.

I murmured an incoherent something, affecting not to understand.

"This Kimat, she is a good-looking girl—she does not lack appeal!"

"I have noticed that," I answered, taking a chance. Fat Umid's dark eyes darted anger, and she turned on me furiously.

"She works with you," she said suggestively. "You have plenty of opportunities. Why do you not exercise your manhood, wed her and give her child?"

I wished to reply that I was already a cook and a camel herder, but I fancy I just looked silly. It was an awkward question, and one which not many men have had to answer.

I tried to dissemble.

"Madame," I said with as much dignity as I could muster, "I come from the south, where the women are comely. They are not poor specimens such as Kimat, whose very presence repels me. They are fine, upstanding women, and they have substance. They are not reeds to be broken in the hand, but Women," and I allowed my eyes to wander over Umid's massiveness with what I hoped was fervent admiration.

Umid's chins commenced to tremble, and her face wreathed itself into a concertinaed smile.

"She is a poor creature," she agreed with relish, "and any man with half an eye would see as much. You do not like her?"

"Madame. You know my position. It is not for me to complain, but perhaps I may be permitted to tell you that I am happier when I am herding the camels!"

This was hard on Kimat, but it made a hit with Umid, whose torso accomplished some amazing things as she shook with the laughter which consumed her.

"Oh!" she croaked, sobbing out great gusts of sound, "you are droll." She looked me over with a worldly eye. "These men from the south have an eye for women, it seems!" The glance with which she favoured me had the elements of the Come Hither, and I began to feel a little shaken. This Kimat was having much to answer for.

Umid seemed vastly to enjoy the situation, for she returned to extract a few more morsels of relish.

"So you would not wish to have Kimat for a wife?"

I achieved an expression like a sanitary inspector on the trail.

Umid was having one of those Days of Days, and she was determined to see it through. Amusement such as this did not come often in the life of a caravan woman. However, it was my turn, and I had to say something.

"Madame," I said gravely, "it is true that I saw all that Kimat has to offer, and I was not impressed. Knowing my thoughts, and knowing how I despise such women, I am sure that you would not have me lie with her!"

A change came over Umid and she looked like a water-buffalo about to charge.

"There are others who would," she exclaimed angrily—"others who have not the wisdom and the fastidiousness of the men of the south."

She waddled off, breathing heavily, and I had time to collect my battered senses.

I knew that this matter was not to end here, and I confess that my principal concern was for myself. Kimat, I believed, to be clever enough to look after herself. Abdul and his lieutenant would fight out their own battle. Frankly, I was afraid of Umid. I had seen enough of the world to realise that it is the one who is projected into a matrimonial tangle who invariably gets hurt, and Umid was capable of thinking up all manner of schemes, any one of which was likely to be acutely embarrassing.

She might, for instance, in her increasing upbraiding of Abdul, suggest scornfully to him that the Lotus flower which he craved was not so pure and innocent as he had imagined, and that a younger and more virile man had sniffed at its fragrance. Such a suggestion would have made matters awkward for me, and for Kimat too, but—as Kimat would be hurt in the process Umid would not worry very much. That would be left to me.

Again, in my blishments, I might have gone too far. In order to arouse Abdul's jealousy, and to prick him on his softest spot—his honour—she might suggest that her charms were not so faded as Abdul's waywardness would seem to suggest, and that an admiring eye had already been cast in her direction.

I could visualise Abdul's reaction to this, and I was not comforted.

There were other, and more obvious schemes, whereby Abdul might be presented with a *fait accompli*, but these I put into the background.

I spent several uncomfortable days, during which Abdul made his inclinations more and more obvious. Kimat went around with a smile continually trembling at her lips, and her eyes took on a knowledgeable glint which made me fear the worst. From some source or another she had even procured a scent, and oil with which to decorate her hair.

Kimat became more and more useless to me as an assistant, and I hailed the day when there was a change in routine. One evening she failed to appear, and her place was taken by another woman named Kizliar. This newcomer told me that she

had been detailed to take over Kimat's culinary duties, as Kimat was required for work in Abdul's tent.

"So, he has sent for her at last?"

The whole caravan was aware of Abdul's enchantment, and Kizliar was well aware of my meaning.

She shook her head, and smiled.

"No," she answered. "Umid asked for her as handmaiden."

"Umid thinks that she will be safer under her own eye?"

Kizliar shrugged her shoulders, and her response gave me my first indication of Umid's counter-strategy.

"There are occasions when it is not prudent to attract the men," she said softly.

I pondered on this for a moment. Then: "D'you think that Umid plans her hurt?"

"A woman must fight for her own!" Kizliar was terse. Evidently, she had small sympathy with Kimat.

"What do you think will happen?" I had visions of back-breaking tasks which would quell this young thing's spirit—tasks which would perhaps coarsen her, and quickly rob her of the bloom of youth.

I knew that these Central Asiatic women could be drastic. I had more than one woman pointed out to me in Bokhara who had but two unsightly breathing holes where her nose should have been. In many of these cases the woman had been so maltreated by an outraged husband in reward for her unfaithfulness,

but in others which were indicated to me, I was assured that the operation had been performed by an irate wife.

I began to think that Kimat was in for an unhappy time, but neither Kizliar nor I gave full due to Umid's powers of invention. I might have known that she would not have attempted anything so blatant as that envisaged by Kizliar.

Twenty-four hours after she had entered upon her new duties, the story went round that Kimat was running a high temperature. Before the end of the day she was vomiting and prostrate. By night, she was dead.

Her body was brought out into the open, and it was obvious to me that she had been poisoned. I shrewdly suspected that she had been made to imbibe a drink of rank herbs, of which many are to be found in that region.

But Umid had not yet finished.

This young rival had been removed, but she still had to contend with Abdul. When he was informed of what had occurred he raved and cursed, bemoaning the financial loss of a slave, but his rage was incommensurate with the debit.

That evening another rumour ran like wildfire through the caravan. It was rumoured that Bans had encompassed the girl's death, enraged because Abdul had inveigled her into his tent.

The rumour assumed strength, and took on circumstantial detail with each re-telling. I have no doubt that by the time it got to the ears of Abdul it was complete in all its facets.

Next day we did not march, and the encampment was all whispers and suspicion.

How, everyone asked, would Abdul accept this affront to his dignity.

Everyone seemed to be asking the question except Bans who, I believe, remained in blissful ignorance of the whole affair until the moment of his death.

On the following morning we marched.

Abdul called Bans to him after we had proceeded about a mile. He calmly produced his pistol from his robe, and shot Bans as he sat on his camel.

Bans gave one look of pained surprise, then slowly toppled from his eminence. He never uttered a word. Neither, for that matter, did Abdul. Perhaps he had his doubts.

Umid I marked down as a woman of brain and resource. As far as possible, I determined, she and I would steer vastly different courses in the future.

CHAPTER IX

THE CAMEL WHIP

It may seem extraordinary to Westerners that Abdul could so easily shoot his lieutenant in cold blood, and that the rest of the caravan should accept the situation—indeed, it did more than accept. It would have been vastly surprised had he acted otherwise.

Abdul, as I have previously hinted, was a person of mixed parentage, but he came of stock which, though mixed, had one thing in common, and that a disposition to deride the irksome confinement of cities and towns, a hatred of self-discipline, and a firm belief in the adage that might is right.

For generations, the peoples of Central Asia have lived in a debatable land with Russia, China and Persia claiming suzerainty over large tracts which they had not the power to govern.

For centuries, in Khorosan, there have been those who can only be described as savage, ferocious, predatory, and bloodthirsty.

Khorosan, from the earliest ages, has been the theatre of fierce and bloody conflict in which the wandering tribes have taken a full and active part. Systematic plunder has been bred in the bone, and the taste for the unlicensed has strengthened with every succeeding age.

Undoubtedly the origin of selling captives as slaves is to be found in this desire for plunder, for a ready sale was to be found for labour in a country which is being constantly denuded of its man-power by warfare and sudden death.

With so powerful an encouragement for barbarity and outrage it is not surprising that these traits should permeate the private lives of individuals. I assure you that Abdul was no exception.

Life had but little value in Abdul's eyes. Being what he was, the merest trifle was apt to occasion bloodshed. Tribal wanderers such as he would not hesitate to put wife, or child or servant to death. Only the question of self-interest would deter, and the realisation that one was destroying something of value.

In so summarily disposing of Bans, Abdul was only acting according to his lights.

In the country through which we were then moving—to the north-east of Mashed, and not far from the frontier of Persia, we were encountering tribesmen of a like mind. Because we were a compact, and a well-armed company, we could march or halt, as the whim took Abdul, with a certain amount of security. The tribesmen in this area encamp in parties from thirty to a hundred, and each has its elder. Beyond that they do not suffer discipline. Indeed, were anyone to allocate a superior position to himself, it would be the signal for his speedy demise. Among such people there is no sense of cohesion, and to that Abdul owed his immunity from attack.

As one with the status of a slave, and one with no possessions which would excite avarice, it was safe for me to wander from our encampments at times, and converse with these tribesmen.

I was principally struck by the spirit of simplicity and equality which actuated all their lives. I observed then that they would afford excellent ground for the sowing of Soviet principles, for none displayed any deference to the claims of age or relationship; there was no distinction of rank such as is found in almost every country of the world outside Turkomania.

The greatest as well as the lowliest would enter a tent with the customary cry of "Salaam Aleikum" and would squat down without any regard to place or person. There was not the slightest semblance of etiquette, or "manners" such as qualifies the actions of most other races.

These people prided themselves on their hospitality, notwithstanding their gaucherie, though it would be exceedingly unsafe for any but a Moslem, and a Suni at that, to sample it. Plunder and rapine is so deeply ingrained that it can overcome even the ceremony of the eating of salt.

On the occasions when I approached these people, the ceremonial was invariably the same. I would be saluted at the first tent, and the owners would insist on my becoming their guest. Even should the tent contain but a solitary woman, the practice was the same. To attempt to excuse oneself, or to depart for another tent, would be to offer a serious affront, and one which might easily spell a murderous attack.

I found that the women did not veil their faces

as did the majority of Moslem women at that time. Some wore a thin strip of cotton which concealed the face beneath the nose, but most of them ignored the custom in its entirety.

They would not rise when addressing a stranger, but would continue, quite unconcernedly, with the work upon which they were engaged. This was not because I was a slave, bent upon a pleasurable stroll and with a well-armed master in the offing. This was their custom with all.

The fact that I was a person of no consequence, however, and, moreover, one who could not be secured without inviting the attentions of Abdul, did save me from embarrassments of another nature.

The wiles of these tribeswomen are well known in the region of the Oxus. Their display of hospitality is frequently two-edged. If they sense a favourable victim they feed him well, and then practise their allure. If they can seduce the stranger, so much the better, for it is then that men who have been spying through the tent rush in and create turmoil. The incautious stranger is accused of transgressing the laws of hospitality, and of besmirching the honour of the men. He is doomed, without further ceremony, to death or captivity, and all his worldly goods are parcelled out.

This, of course, is an age-old trick, and one which is not confined to Turkomania or its adjoining territories. The same tactics, placed in a Western environment, form the basis for no little profitable blackmail in staid and stodgy England if one can judge by the Sunday newspapers.

These tribesmen had quite remarkable horses. At first sight I was apt to disparage them, and to consider them too long in the body, and deficient in muscle, but I learned that they possessed almost incredible powers of endurance. These men, especially prior to some plundering raid, would go to extreme lengths to prepare their horses for long and arduous marches. They would gallop them for miles together, yet feed them sparingly on a diet of barley. At night they would cover them with thick felts, and sweat away every particle of unwanted flesh, until, in fact, the muscles stood out firm and hard. When the owner could say of his horse, "his flesh is as marble," he would consider him in condition. When in such shape these horses, I was assured by more than one, could cover fifty or sixty miles a day for a week on end.

I never discovered what was Abdul's business in these regions, and to be frank, I was not particularly interested. I wondered when he was going to move toward Qilat, but it was whispered through the encampment that we were to miss this city, and proceed in the general direction of Tejend.

It was at a distance of some forty miles from a village named Madan that Abdul called a halt of some days. The country was very wild and remote. Wild and aggressive communities were everywhere, and Abdul warned all that it would be unsafe to wander far from our encampment.

Near to hand, however, were a number of turquoise mines, some of which have been worked in haphazard fashion for centuries. I asked Abdul for

permission to investigate the workings. He shrugged his shoulders, looked at me as if I were demented, and made no comment. I took this as an assent.

I found the mines to be disappointing, and not mines at all in the European sense of the term. Some were mere holes in the ground, others were worthy of the designation of quarries, and others could best be described as tunnellings into the hill-sides. Some of these tunnels bit deeply into the hills, and were quite extensive, and they had often afforded a place of refuge when the surrounding communities were attacked in force. I was told that the tunnels, because of the frequency with which they had been required for this purpose, had been rendered quite habitable, and had been so as long as the oldest inhabitant could remember.

I descended one deep excavation dug in the solid rock and I found working there a solitary man. I could observe small veins of turquoise in the rock, and I went to take stock of the man's gleanings. His day's work was represented by slender pieces of turquoise contained in an old shoe. All the pieces were small, and most had those small white spots which lessen its value. It was a remarkably poor haul, and I was rash enough to commiserate with the miner.

He turned on me surlily, then picked up a heavy piece of rock and threatened to squash in my head unless I handed over all the valuables I possessed.

It took me some time, and his hands must have been quite tired, until I could convince him that my wordly treasures measured less than his. Poor devil. I suppose he thought this highly improbable.

I watched the fellow at work after he had given up the idea of robbing me of what I hadn't got, and his actions were loose and slovenly. He had a hammer with which to break the rock, and an adze with one sharp and one heavy end. There was no system attaching to his labours, and his work was necessarily slow, uncertain and not very profitable.

It happened to be a Friday when I visited the mines, so there were remarkably few men at work. Even so, I could form an opinion of the nature of the activities there, and I was not impressed. I suffered a great sense of disappointment, for the mines have been famous for centuries and have always been regarded as the principal source of supply for the beautiful stone.

I was informed afterwards that there were other mines in the vicinity which were somewhat better managed. This was possibly so, but I imagine that superlatives in respect to the management would be unnecessary.

I did not see these other turquoise mines, but I did see a salt mine of sorts some four miles distant. Here, too, there were a number of excavations in which veins of salt were to be seen, some six to eighteen inches in thickness. The workmen there used pointed hammers which they utilised as wedges. The salt, beautifully white, was detached in large masses.

I remember this visit because it coincided with one of Abdul's debauches. He had secured some of the wine of the country, and when I returned to the encampment, his Moslem characteristics were well

submerged. Abdul worked on the assumption, on these occasions, that there was as much sin in a gallon as there was in a gill and that if he was to undergo any future penance he need not forego the pleasure. When Abdul went to the bottle, he did not pursue that path of gradual exhilaration which makes for sprightliness and genial conversation. He looked for one thing, and one thing only, and that a quick and deep sense of utter intoxication.

When I returned Abdul had not far to go before he attained that felicity. He gazed at me with a reddened, film-covered eye which could still mirror subdued hostility.

He was swaying gently on his feet, as I returned his stare. When he caught sight of his slave, he folded his arms in an absurd gesture of dignity which tended only to increase the arc of his sway, and looked me over with an air of derision.

He demanded, in thick, blurred accents, where I had been.

I told him, quietly enough, that I had walked to the salt mines to examine the excavations. He laughed his disbelief.

He took a lurching step toward me, and leered into my face. His foul, fetid breath assailed my nostrils, and caused my stomach to gyrate, but I could not openly display the disgust which I felt.

"You have been trailing some woman!"

I disregarded the accusation, believing that a still tongue was the best in the circumstances.

He extended a wavering finger toward me, and dug me in the cheek.

"You have been trailing some woman." He repeated the phrase as if he enjoyed hearing the words slur over his tongue.

I took a step backward.

Abdul burst suddenly into loud and raucous laughter.

"No, it was not a woman!" He shook his head, as if he had suddenly achieved some great discovery.

"No, it was not a woman, I have heard about you men from the south—you like them fat, and well-covered, don't you?"

Again he laughed, but there was a spiteful innuendo in his words which I did not like.

Again his mood seemed to change, for the menace left him, and lofty derision once more took its place.

"But, I was forgetting," he taunted. "There was Kimat. She was your assistant. She had bright eyes, and she was not malformed, and—you were no man . . . !"

"No man!"

I wondered how long I would have to listen to this absurd catechism, but the alcohol, once again rushing dizzily through his brain, brought him round full cycle.

He looked at me suspiciously, edging forward to peer the more closely into my eyes.

"You *were* trailing a woman," he exclaimed, and with as much conviction as if I had admitted the impeachment.

He shook with rage, and little flecks of saliva appeared at his lips. I can see him now, literally foaming in his mad ecstatic anger.

"You know that these women spell trouble! You know that these Turkomans will be round demanding retribution. You know that we shall probably be attacked. . . ."

He stumbled toward where one of those huge camel whips had been thrown down. Somehow he picked it up without falling headlong on his face.

"You were trailing a woman," he repeated inanely, and swung the long lash.

I saw that terrible, braided hide coming, and I jumped hastily out of the way. It curled through the air with a vicious hissing, and Abdul staggered with the force of the swing, and cursed, slobberingly. He was not a pretty sight, and was far from secure on his legs, so deep had been his potations, but there was none there who could remonstrate with him. I could hear the excited murmuring of concealed onlookers, and I prayed, fervently, that something would be done which would divert Abdul's attention, but Abdul, drunk, and with a camel whip in his hand, was a person whom all instinctively avoided.

He snarled and gasped as the lash whirled and leaped on the ground. The fact that I had evaded the stroke only added fuel to his already berserk rage, and he swung his great arms to strike again. This time something told me that I was to feel the hide bite into my vitals. The thought induced a cold sweat of horror, and left me helpless and immobile.

I watched the lash as it curled round Abdul's shoulders, and I was held fascinated. The whole of

my weight seemed to have descended into my legs. It was as if I was held to the spot with diver's boots.

I was quite unable to move, even though my brain was clamouring at me, "Run, run, you fool." Something within me was shouting this with vibrant voice, yet the looming arc of the lash fascinated me, and held me spellbound.

It came tearing through the air whining its message of ugly menace. Some of it curled over my head, and I waited in cold apprehension for the stinging signal of its arrival on my body. The interval between the knowledge that I was trapped within its furls, and the actual impinging of its surface seemed grotesquely protracted.

I think that I have mentioned before that these lashes are about fifteen feet long. Between the savage swinging of Abdul's arms and the split second when that hide met my body there was an appreciable interim for blurred, agonising thought.

I had been struck by the lash before, but never had a camel whip been lifted against me.

I wondered what would happen. I supposed that it would bite through my clothing, tear my flesh, and leave me with a hurtful weal.

Actually, it was nothing like that.

A great weight suddenly descended below my shoulders. I can recall now the grunt I gave. It was as if I had been charged by an elephant. The grunt was strangled in my throat, for immediately afterwards an avalanche hit me in the stomach. A split second later, as the lash curled still further, a mad buffalo charged me in the back, just over the kidney.

Each was a knock-out blow. I felt my stomach rising and heaving. I saw the tents whirling round in a mad riot, and I went down.

I was told afterwards that Abdul fell headlong with the force of the blow he had delivered, and had lain there in a drunken torpor.

I have no idea when I regained my senses. Someone had removed my clothing, and had roughly attended to my wounds. I had two deep, tearing gashes across my back, and a bloody streaky mess across my stomach which made me sick to contemplate. Every time I breathed my chest hurt, and for some days I believed that a rib had been crushed.

The difficulty of breathing remained with me for more than a week, and I counted myself lucky that more harm had not accrued. Had Abdul not been bemused with drink, and had he directed the lash with more acumen, I am certain that he could have killed me with that single stroke. Two, or three strokes from these terrible whips would be tantamount to a death sentence. No human frame could stand up to its ravages.

Fortunately, I was physically fit, and my body was clean. I went to great lengths, also, in tending my lacerated skin. I bathed myself frequently with very hot water, much to the secret amusement of those within the encampment. I had, however, no desire to see my body defiled and permanently disfigured. The ordinary caravan dweller, in like circumstances would have allowed nature and dirt to take its normal course. Judging by what I had seen, a puckered, discoloured ridge of flesh over the

course of the weals would have been the inevitable heritage.

It was fortunate for me that we were not marching at this time. I do not believe that I would have survived the jerking movements of a camel for many hours on end. As it was, when at length we did move off, I was far from being fully recovered.

During the period of my convalescence in camp I was still required to do my cooking. Nothing short of death would let me off my appointed tasks. The effort of bending and stooping over a fire frequently made me sick and giddy, such was my pain, but I was glad afterwards that movement had been forced upon me. It meant that my muscles remained supple, and that I was spared the agonies of stiffness. Also, movement, even if painful, tended to accelerate my recovery, as it left me little time for morbid reflection.

Abdul never said anything about his attack on me, and to the best of my knowledge never troubled himself with enquiries respecting my condition. His libations went on for several days, and his churlishness of temper remained with him for several more.

When, eventually, he did deign to notice my presence he acted as if there had never been anything untoward.

The incident, however, as soon as I had recovered from my bodily ills, steeled me in my determination to remain with Abdul, and recover my papers. Having undergone so much, I reasoned that there was too much on the debit side to throw all away on an insane desire for freedom which, even in the best

circumstances, could only make my plight worse, and in the worst, entail a not very pleasant death.

I was resolved, however, to treat Abdul with a little more circumspection. I determined, when next he took to the bottle, that wild horses would not drive me into his presence.

CHAPTER X

HOW ABDUL MET A CHALLENGE

I HAVE often puzzled my brains in an effort to solve the problem implied by Abdul's lengthy stay near the turquoise mines, but I can only surmise that it was to take over something valuable and contraband for disposal by underhand means known only to him.

Two or three days before we broke camp he called me to him, and informed me that he desired me to accompany him on a call he intended to make upon a local Eminence. Abdul had heard that I had travelled in Europe, and he wished to parade me as a curiosity, and have me perform my tricks like a tame clown. Abdul made it quite plain that my task was to remain in the background until I was required to occupy the stage and say my piece. Thereafter, as far as he was concerned, I could go to Hell.

On this cheerful and thoroughly friendly understanding, we set out.

Evidently, however, the Eminence, who clearly knew Abdul of old, was in no mind to keep me in the background. He was a cheerful old man with a carefully hennaed beard and a pounding blood pressure. He was a drink addict, but a jovial one. He would seize a bottle of wine and empty it with

as much gurgling as a camel, smack his rotund tummy with immense satisfaction, and beam widely upon the assembled company.

I imagine that he is dead long since.

I heard him tell Abdul that his consumption of liquor had gone up in recent years, and that it took increasing amounts to soar to that degree of elevation which he considered to be alcoholically requisite. His skin was mottled, and his veins stood out on him like cords, but the old rogue could still laugh. When he did he shook with extreme violence. His waistband must have moved up and down in an arc of several inches.

Farukh Khan was his name, and his face creased with smiles when he saw me. Abdul, he waved to a place on a mat. There was a solitary chair in the room, and this he indicated had been procured specially for my benefit.

"You have been long in the West," he said, "and will have Western customs. You will be more comfortable on a chair?"

Hastily I explained that I would be more comfortable on a mat. I could see Abdul lifting his eyebrows, and indeed, it would have been extraordinary if the slave had sat in state while his master grovelled near the floor. Farukh Khan was kindly, but he had no finesse.

Farukh Khan further embarrassed me, for he completely misunderstood my motives in refusing the chair.

"Perhaps you would care to walk about? I understand that these Western people always stride about

a room with their hands in their pockets, or behind their backs, and perhaps you have the habit——!"

I assured Farukh Khan that I should be well content to behave as an Eastern.

"Tell me," he demanded, as soon as I was settled, "why do these people walk about? Is it part of some religious custom?"

Gravely I told him that Europeans, while certainly more restless in their habits than Asiatics, sat down more frequently than not, and that striding about a room betokened either nervous agitation, or deep thought.

Farukh Khan would have none of this. He produced a very dilapidated illustrated newspaper published in London containing the usual flashlight photographs of receptions, and the like. In every instance, the guests were standing, talking animatedly where they were not smiling toothily into the camera. Until then, I had not realised how much standing there was in England, and temporarily, I was defeated.

Farukh Khan went further, and produced another tattered magazine. Here was a picture of a new snack bar which had been installed somewhere in London, and the clients were standing around performing all manner of things with forks and their fingers.

"Don't these people ever sit down?" he demanded.

I told him that there were buses in which one sat on a very comfortable seat and went a very long way for a penny.

He smiled his disbelief.

I said that the trains, which went incredibly

quickly, some drawn by steam and others propelled by electricity, had exceedingly comfortable seating accommodation.

For answer, Farukh Khan produced yet another magazine, a humorous one, in which there was a drawing, blatantly facetious, depicting a rush-hour on the underground. All that could be discerned was a mob of people, all tightly squashed together, and all inevitably standing.

It was useless to explain to him that there was an element of fun in the drawing, and that it grossly exaggerated that which it depicted.

"So, these people stand in their trains?" His tone was a challenge.

"At certain hours, when all the people are leaving their labour, there are insufficient seats for all." I tried to be patient, but Farukh Khan was in no mood to be convinced.

"Are many injured in boarding the trains—thousands trying to get on them, all at the same time? These must be a mad people!"

I told him that the people did not fight and riot, and were very orderly. I added that many of the trains were beneath the surface of the ground, and that there were rooms into which people entered. These, when full, sank through the earth to the level of the trains.

Farukh Khan said, "Yaw!" which was equivalent to a London waitress's, "Oh, Ye-es!" and sank another bottle.

I grew desperate, and said that in certain places there were staircases leading down to the trains.

Farukh Khan brightened at this, because he could understand a staircase, but the gloomy look came back to his eye when I added the information that the staircases moved, and that one progressed without the fatigue of walking.

He suddenly decided that he had learned sufficient about the West, and confined his attentions to Abdul.

Shortly, Abdul signalled to me to retire. He told me afterwards in one of his more amiable moments, that I had seriously displeased the Eminence, who was firmly convinced that I had been romancing. Even Abdul was inclined to the belief that I had over-painted, and he seemed vastly amused when I told him that I had said nothing less than the truth.

There was considerable activity in the encampment following the visit to Farukh Khan, and Abdul displayed a considerable impatience to be gone. He was detained, however, by a very curious incident.

Abdul had taken a liking to one of the horses which we had captured. It was a well-favoured animal, and fast and useful, and he frequently rode it instead of a camel. The morning after the Farukh Khan incident I was told that the animal's head was swollen from the effects of a kick, and I was requested to examine it. I did not pretend to be a veterinary surgeon, but these people were pleased to think that I knew much about horses, and I was unwilling to undeceive them.

The horse was indeed in an appalling state. Its already over-large head was swollen to twice its normal size. Its eyes were completely closed, and it

was incapable of opening its mouth, which was exuding copious amounts of saliva.

The horse was grey in colour, and its attendants had smeared it over with a form of red clay—they said that they had done this to cool him—and he looked a very sorry spectacle. Had it not been so deplorable, it would have been grotesque.

I examined the creature's head, and wisely held my tongue. There were undoubtedly marks there, but they had never been caused by a kicking. They were the direct result of savage blows, inflicted by someone with a grudge against Abdul.

The caravan men said that the horse had been stricken with *yaman*—a curious swelling disease which, they added, sometimes affected humans, attacking their legs and their stomachs. They assured me that its effects were not fatal.

I was convinced that treatment would be long and tedious, and said so. In this the men confirmed my diagnosis, and gave the opinion that the animal would not be fit for riding for a month. With no medicines—not even a colic ball—I was helpless, and said so. I have never struck a similar case such as this, and I have no desire to do so.

Undoubtedly there was a germ, peculiar to the ground around, which had infected the lacerated wounds. When examining the horse and coming to this conclusion, I thought unhappily of my own wounds, now rapidly healing. Until we had left the district I determined to redouble my efforts to keep free from infection, even though the effort was exceedingly laborious.

Abdul, as I have said, was increasingly anxious to be away, and this anxiety appeared to be shared by the Eminence.

In any event, Farukh Khan, hearing of the calamity which had befallen Abdul's favourite steed, immediately despatched one of his own to the encampment with a message, full of fulsome compliments, begging Abdul to accept the "trifling present."

It was a magnificent animal, and I was rather surprised that Farukh should have been so generous.

However, apparently it was all part of a ceremonial. It was nothing more than a *beau geste*, and a delicate hint to Abdul that he should be breaking camp.

Abdul sent back a message, equally brimming with compliments, stating that he was overwhelmed with the magnificence of the "gift." So overwhelmed was he that he asked to be excused the "embarrassment" of accepting it. Abdul embarrassed!

Abdul retained the horse for perhaps another hour. I shrewdly suspect that he was not playing the game according to the rules in keeping it that long.

After that interval a servant appeared from Farukh to take it away.

He expressed, on behalf of his master, Farukh's delight that the present should have been so much appreciated, and his "acute disappointment" in that circumstances were such that Abdul had been "compelled" to return it.

• Abdul and Farukh had made a "deal" of sorts, but what it was we were to transport in our caravan

I never discovered. I know that whatever it was it was not unduly bulky, and that it was of considerable value, for Abdul impressed upon all the necessity of maintaining a sharp eye for pilferers and a readiness to beat off an attack should one be launched against us.

It was said that we were to march in the general direction of Mashed, and this proved to be the case. As we passed through the hills and ravines we saw many fine villages clustered at the foot of the hills, and the countryside seemed to be fairly prosperous. There was an abundance of water, and fields were well tilled. We made our first halt after quite a short march of twenty-two to twenty-five miles near a village named Derrud—a place of numerous fruit trees and a comfortable air of well-being. The remains of a fort upon a neighbouring hill spoke of a warlike history beneath the surface of smiling complacency.

There was a good deal of ice and snow about on the higher reaches of the hills which we had to traverse, and the camels did not like it. They snorted their fear and disgust when their great pads slipped on ice-laden rocks, and the camel men seemed to share in their apprehension. I was to learn why.

From Derrud we had to cross the range which divides the plain of Nishapur from that of Mashed and Turkomania, and it was a very stiff climb indeed. The descent was worse, for we were assailed by a biting, freezing wind which bit right through one. It numbed my hands, caused my stomach to tremble, and made me fear for my nose and ears. It was a

difficult descent, the so-called road winding for many miles at a sharp decline. And the camels protested gurglingly.

We were about half-way down when that which I feared would happen occurred. One of the camels slid on a slippery, ice-covered patch, and its ungainly legs parted in the splits. Now a camel is no ballet dancer, and pressed down by the weight of its load, it descended until its leg-joints went, and its internal organs were badly disarranged. There is only one thing to do to a camel when it does that, and that is to shoot it. I wondered if Abdul would spare the ammunition, or whether he would allow the unfortunate animal to remain there for the vultures, which would soon be darkening the sky.

I admit that I was surprised. Abdul rode up, dismounted, pulled out his pistol, and shot the moaning beast through the ear. I never for one moment imagined that he would have the decency to put an animal out of its misery.

But—the amazing contradictions of the man!

No sooner had he shot the animal, than he demanded the presence of the responsible camel man.

The man came, and he should have seen from Abdul's expression that he should tread warily, but always loud-mouthed and inclined to be supercilious because he imagined that he was in the running for the position so suddenly vacated by the deceased Bans, he chose to be captious, if not openly insolent.

"How came this to happen?"

Abdul glanced down at the still quivering form of the camel, and his tone held a direct accusation of neglect.

The man screwed up his eyes, and he spoke back to Abdul as an equal.

"The camel," he remarked easily, "was heavily laden—too heavily laden for this road at this season."

We had, of course, not come upon the regular caravan route. Abdul was always one to choose the byways, and there was some truth in what the man said. Had he been a diplomat, however—and it was necessary to be one when confronting Abdul—his tone would have been otherwise.

I saw the blood rush to Abdul's face, and took care to remain outside the range of his angry eyes.

"You would tell me what road to take?" Abdul forced the question at the camel man like a rapier thrust.

"I said the camel was overladen. Eight camels bear that which you have collected from the last village, and the others carry the extra burden." The man began to glare back, and there was an obdurate set about his jaw which spelt trouble.

Abdul ground his teeth, and expectorated upon the dead camel.

"I spoke of roads—not burdens," he rejoined, an icy nip in his voice. "I think you questioned the propriety of using this one?"

The camel man blustered. "You can see for yourself what it is like." He pointed dramatically to the ice and snow by which we were surrounded. He allowed his rough leathern shoe to slide over a patch of ice further to illustrate his meaning. It was a foolish gesture, and in the circumstances, remarkably like rubbing in an insult.

Abdul took it as one, and rushed forward to grasp the man by the throat. The camel man, however, was agile. He avoided the rush without difficulty, and as Abdul slid past, he turned at bay, an ugly knife gleaming in his hands.

Abdul turned, too, and he would have renewed the rush, but he caught sight of the knife, and stopped dead in his tracks.

This was the first time that I had seen Abdul faced with a real emergency, and peeping from behind a thoroughly bored camel, I wondered how he would react. He was undoubtedly a bully of the worst order. Would he, like so many other bullies when threatened with damage to their own skin, think better of the situation and crawl out with his tail down?

Abdul did not give me long for idle speculation. Bully or not, he was a fighter.

Only two paces separated the antagonists, and the camel man certainly had the advantage.

All vestige of anger seemed to leave Abdul when he observed the knife, and cool determination took its place.

Here was someone who had dared to challenge his supremacy. Here was someone with a knife in his hands, already committed to a course of action from which there was no withdrawal. Almost was I thinking in accord with Abdul. His mental processes were so patent.

A hand had been raised against the leader. That inevitably meant death for one or the other. There could be no middle course; no backing out; no

possible explanations which could cover such a situation.

The camel man knew too. ' He may have drawn his knife in a moment of uncontrollable anger, but now his rage, too, had been dissipated. He had no need to be told that it was now one or the other. I will say this for him. He did not appear to shirk the issue. Of course, he had his knife already drawn, the challenge had been thrown down and accepted, and while Abdul was merely defending a title, he had everything to gain by the outcome of a lucky thrust.

The camel man gradually sank into a crouch, and he swayed gently on his feet, so lightly was he poised. He reminded me of a leopard about to spring on its prey.

Both men kept their eyes unblinkingly on those of the other; neither was giving way an inch. The atmosphere was tense, and not one in the caravan spoke. All that could be heard was the scolding and the gurgling of the camels, the nearest of whom looked down upon the humans jockeying for that position which would spell life or death, with foolish and supercilious disdain.

The scene seemed so unreal. It lacked a swiftly moving, yet muted orchestra, and that indefinable aroma of disinfectant and cosmetics which seems an inseparable part of Drury Lane.

Abdul was the first to break the spell. He took a sudden backward leap, as if purposely to increase the distance between him and the knife. As he did so, his hand went with lightning rapidity to his robe, where all knew he carried his pistol.

The camel man had evidently anticipated such a manoeuvre, for with Abdul's first move, he leaped. In that split second, Abdul gave up the quest for his gun, and threw up his hands to ward off the knife which was speeding toward him. His wrist encircled that of the camel man's, and an amazing wrestling match ensued.

Suddenly, one or the other of the fighters slipped upon the ice, and both were down. In the skurry it was impossible for a moment or so to determine which of the two was uppermost. It proved to be Abdul, and he had his teeth in the camel man's wrist. The camel man fought back, and with his free hand, tried to gouge out one of Abdul's eyes, but the latter withstood the infliction, and bit the harder.

It was an amazing trial this—not one of strength, but of ability to stand pain, and Abdul won.

After what seemed to be an interminable period, the knife clattered to the rocks, and Abdul directed his teeth elsewhere. Wrenching at the man's arms, he slowly bore them downwards, and as he leaned forward with the descending movement, he craned his neck and brought his teeth together on the bridge of the camel man's nose.

I need not tell you more of the rest of that fight, except to say that the camel man was rendered unconscious.

When Abdul rose to contemplate his heavily breathing adversary he was no pretty sight, and I awaited for him to administer the *coup de grâce*. I

thought all was over except for the report which would signal the end.

I was mistaken.

Abdul was not one to give to a mutineer the easy passing which he had just bestowed upon a camel.

He called for water, and had the man thoroughly dowsed. When the camel man opened his eyes, and sought to sit up, Abdul called for a camel whip.

I saw the first crushing descent of the lash, but not the second, or those which followed. The sight of this terrible instrument of death was too much for my weakened stomach.

Even now, however, I can recall the stricken man's sobbing grunts and the sibilant "Ah's" of the caravan folk as they followed each wildly sweeping lash on its revolting errand.

Camel men are tough, and this one took long to die—too long.

Even after the man's cries had ceased I continued to hear the swish of the lash. Abdul continued until he was exhausted.

When all was finished, I looked up.

I saw Abdul spurning a dreadful, shapeless mess with his boot. I saw him edge it across the roadway until it hung over the edge of the precipice and a drop to the trees several hundred feet below. I saw him kick it again, and all that remained of the camel man disappeared.

Without a word, Abdul climbed upon his camel, and gazed along the strung-out caravan.

"You, you and you," he barked. "Unload the dead camel, and each take part of its burden."

In ten minutes we were on the way once more, a self-contained and well-balanced unit.

If we were short of a camel, we were also short of a man.

In such philosophical strain did the camel men review the situation.

CHAPTER XI

MASHED

A DRIVING sleet lashed our faces as we proceeded on our way, but toward evening we saw a gilded dome in the distance which betokened Mashed. We continued, leaving the city well to our left—from the distance it appeared to be a mean and uninviting place—and eventually encamped upon an empty space where the snow was lying in half-melted patches where the ground was not covered with stagnant pools. I arrived dripping and wet, and chilled to the bone, and I felt thoroughly miserable.

We stayed in this quagmire for several days while Abdul conducted business in the city. I found an opportunity of visiting it, and as the capital of Persian Khorosan I found it strangely disappointing.

It is, of course, one of the Holy cities, and vies in this respect with Kerbela. It contains the tomb of Imam Reza, but no one would imagine, to visit it, that the famous Nadir Shah lavished his munificence upon it. A great deal of the city is built of sun-dried bricks and mud, and the majority of the inhabitants are poor. The most striking building is the mausoleum of Imam Reza, which has a fine cluster of domes and a number of stately minarets.

One of the striking features of the mausoleum is an immense oblong, surrounded by two-storeyed apartments, the whole area of which is paved with gravestones under which lie interred Persians of rank, many of whom were transported very long distances in order that protection might be found in the vicinity of their favourite saint.

In the mausoleum itself a gate, said to be the gift of Nadir Shah, admits one to a passage leading to the principal apartment which is an octagonal room with a fine dome. Here the walls and floor are richly ornamented. Here is the shrine where repose the remains of Imam Reza. In a corner, surrounded by a grating, is another shrine where lie the remains of the famous Caliph Harun-ul-Rashed, the father of the Imam's murderer.

Near the mausoleum is a magnificent mosque—perhaps the best in Persia—which was built by Gauher Shahud, the wife of Shah Rokh, son of the great Timur. Shah Rokh did much to embellish the tomb of the Saint, and both he and his wife resided in the neighbourhood of the place for some time.

It will have been noticed that my intention has been far from writing a guide book. Other persons, with more time on their hands and more freedom of movement than I, have visited Khorosan, and I leave the travel description to them. I may be forgiven, however, for my slight incursion into their realm in respect to Mashed because I have always been interested in the inner secrets of religious places. The city of Mashed itself has no claims to antiquity as far as antiquity is reckoned in the East, but there

is no disguising the fact that as a place of religious pilgrimage it has a very remote origin. It is now known as the burial place of the Imam Reza, but tradition has it that pilgrims gathered there long before the Imam became a martyr.

It was related to me by an aged Pir that Alexander the Great, in the course of his expedition which took him to India, came by chance to the spot and pitched his tent there. When the Pir told me the story, I reflected that it must have been in a different season to the present, otherwise he could not have been so enamoured of the place.

However, while on the site of Mashed, he dreamed a dream which caused him considerable uneasiness. He told Aristotle about it who declared that later some holy person would repose upon the ground.

Hearing this, Alexander the Great determined to mark the spot, and he ordered four walls to be erected, enclosing the site which is now the mausoleum, as a reminder of the dream in future days.

Aristotle recorded the dream, and the inferences he had drawn from it, and many hundred years later the celebrated Harun-ul-Rashed came upon the manuscript by accident.

He was nearing his end, and he directed that his body should be interred on the spot marked by Alexander. Actually, of course, he was buried there.

Harun-ul-Rashed's son completed the business by continuing to harry the Shiah as his father had done before him. The Imam Reza, direct in line with the Prophet and a notable Shiah, came into prominence

and it was decided that he was a menace. Harun-ul-Rashed's son, under pretence of distinguished regard, called the Imam before him and offered him a dish of poisoned grapes. The Imam died, and was buried. Thus was Aristotle's rendering of Alexander the Great's dream fulfilled.

It, of course, required something more than this to give Mashed the peculiar place it has in the affections of Shiah pilgrims. Many extraordinary miracles are connected with the city.

The age of miracles did not commence until nearly three hundred years after the Imam's death and interment. Then the Sultan Sanja reigned at Merv, and the son of his Chief Minister became afflicted with leprosy. It was the custom then to drive such unfortunates out of society, but because of the young man's eminence he was not entirely abandoned. He was allowed to travel. By chance his horse's footsteps directed him to Mashed and to the walls which marked the resting place of the Imam. The horse refused to proceed, and remained rooted to the spot, and the Minister's son put this down to supernatural agency. He sprang from his horse, prostrated himself on the ground, prayed to God, and rose cured.

To this day Mashed has a great reputation for miracles, and great numbers are said to have been restored to health and to have recovered sight and hearing after having been deprived of these powers for many years.

Many tales of supernatural agency are told about the place, one of the most hoary bandied among the camel men concerning the adventures of a camel.

This beast, which is said to have performed its duty with great faithfulness over a great span of years, was owned by a man who regularly beat it when it could no longer stand up to the rigours of long marches. The master continued to load it unmercifully, but when at Mashed it took the opportunity of escaping from its attendant. It contrived to pass all barriers—there is something akin to this and the camel and the eye of the needle—and reached the Imam's mausoleum where it lay down. Here it was assailed by blows until the noise attracted the attention of the mullah who forbade further ill-treatment with the remark that the camel had obviously sought the protection of the Saint.

Frightened, the owner offered the animal to the mullah, who tended the animal in comfort until it died.

A simple tale perhaps, and entirely lacking the O'Henry touch of Western stories, but one which found great favour with our camel men and doubtless finds equally appreciative audiences for camel men to-day.

The mullah who recounted to me the tale of Alexander the Great also told me another, of much more recent origin, which he attributed to the supernatural.

He declared that his grandfather had seen the chief actor in the little drama, and heard the circumstances of his escapade and the dire punishment with which it was rewarded from his own lips.

Apparently, a native of Kandahar visited Mashed on a pilgrimage and while in the mausoleum became

overwhelmed with a desire to possess himself of some of the rich treasures which it contained.

With the true Afghan sense of leaving little to chance, he became a resident of the city, and eventually a servant in the mausoleum. His zeal in the performance of his duties commended itself to all, and he believed that when he carried out the robbery he would be the last to be suspected. On the selected night he climbed the dome and let himself through an opening by means of a rope.

He took his pick of the valuables, and was about to scale the rope when a voice from the shrine mumbled, "Beware!"

The Kandahari, a true disciple of the adage, "What I have, I hold," had the temerity to turn on the voice and exclaim:

"What, give these things up after a year's labour!"

Nothing further was heard in remonstrance, but when the fellow felt for his rope he found that it had miraculously shrunk, and was out of his reach. He secured a ladder used for lighting the huge candles, and grasped the rope. He had climbed half way to the roof when the rope broke, and he fell to the ground, sustaining severe injuries.

When discovered in the morning he confessed his crime, and the irritation of the populace was so great that they fell upon him and cut off his hands, to make certain that he should respect the shrine in future.

It is true that the great Nadir Shah, after a series of vicissitudes which had denuded Mashed of much of its glory, showered costly gifts upon the mausoleum.

He adorned the tomb itself with jewels, and had the dome gilded, but the supernatural has not been strong enough to deter others less unfortunate than the Kandahari of the mullah's tale. Licentious rulers have pillaged the treasures to satisfy their own debaucheries. There was once a golden ball over the tomb, and a golden rail surrounded the shrine. Both have disappeared long ago in the shape of golden coins to satisfy the demands of troops.

It seemed to me, judging from the stories which one heard, that another period of pillage was at hand.

At this time, it must be remembered, Asia as a whole was undergoing a tremendous convulsion. Russia, the greatest "white" nation where numbers are concerned, had walked out of the European bloc. She had thrown in her hand with the peoples of the East, and though these were still suspicious of her overtures, there was not one which was not feeling the repercussions of world unrest.

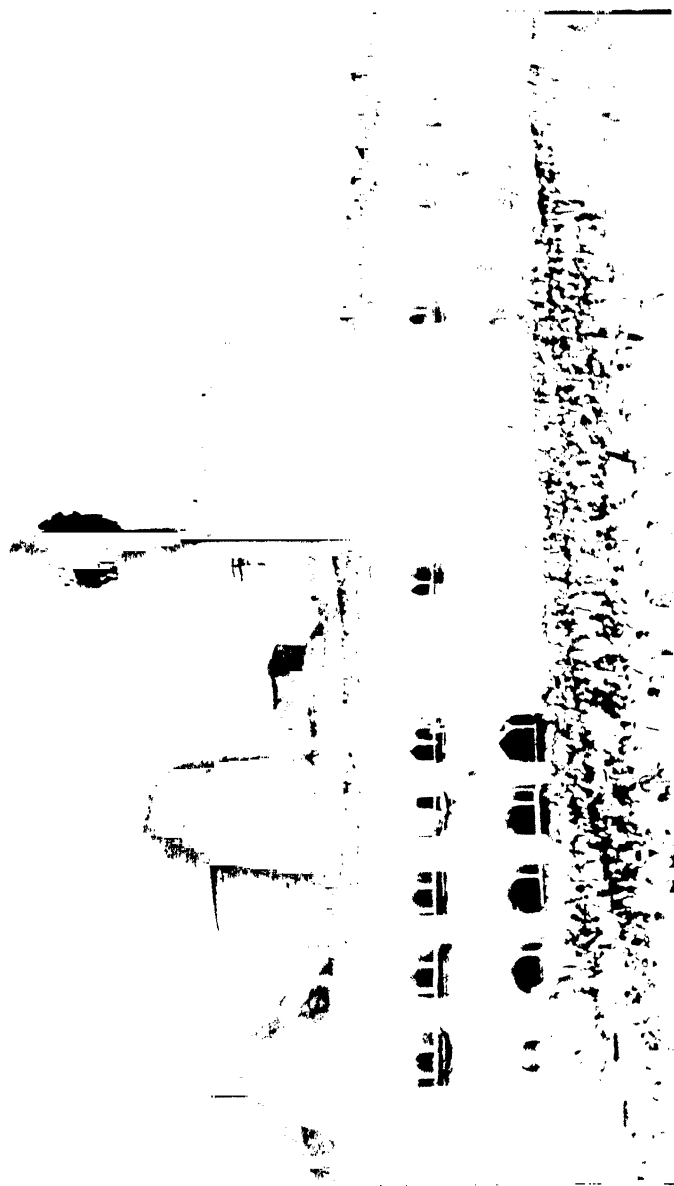
The Kremlin had more than four aces in its pack, and the Joker bore the legend, "Liberator of Asia." The result was a quick change in relationships and outlook with the Opportunists, representing at a conservative estimate 99.9 recurring of the Eastern populations, all of whom were well on their toes and on the look-out for what they might devour.

The Turks had thrown off Western dominion, and Mustapha Kemal, instead of consolidating a hold upon a small holding in St. Helena, had the European Statesmen and the Greek armies running round in futile circles with Mr. Lloyd George well in the van. Egyptian intelligentsia was pressing forward

with demands for independence and nationhood. Russia had inspired the creation of a Persian Nationalist party, and the misrule of the old Shahs was finished. In Afghanistan the most amazing things were happening. King Amanullah was importing top hats and frock coats, was requiring these to be worn by all with grotesque abandon, and half his country was bandit-ridden as a consequence. One bandit, the notorious Bachha Saquo, was eventually to dispossess him of his throne and to reign for nine nightmare months. Further afield, Russia had turned a complete somersault in her relations with China and Mongolia. China was fast going Nationalist. And, in the midst of all this turmoil there were at odd places throughout the East bands of White Russians pledged to defy Communism, and more than a few organisations for the creation of Pan-Islamism.

Khorosan was a stamping ground, and I began to have an inkling of what Abdul had collected from the Eminence. Whatever it was it was valuable, and Abdul had undoubtedly been charged—at a suitable remuneration goes without saying—to remove this to a place of comparative safety. Where and how this place was to be found I did not know. What occasioned the Eminence to trust his family fortunes to a man of Abdul's calibre was beyond me. Perhaps it was a case of the Devil, you know.

While we were in camp we heard that several bands had descended in force from the hills and had attacked and plundered several villages not far from Mashed.



WE CELEBRATE A RELIGIOUS FEAST-DAY IN THIS MOSQUE

Abdul, quite unmindful of what he himself had accomplished on our downward march, waxed most indignant. He descended very far when describing the lowly origin of the robbers. In other circumstances the situation would have been ironical, because Abdul was quite candid, and quite sincere. There was nothing of affectation in the manner in which he verbally chastised the miscreants.

The accounts which came in were of a most unpleasant description. The road to Herat, on which Abdul presumably hoped to travel, was overrun with Turkomans, and there were other bands out on the flanks ready for those with sufficient hardihood to attempt a detour.

What made the accounts so depressing was the manner in which they contradicted each other. One moment the road to Herat would be reported clear and safe, and the next would present tales of pillage and murder.

I wondered why Abdul did not link up with others for part, at least, of his projected journey, but this course did not appeal to him, because he allowed several large caravans to depart without making any effort to join them.

It was while Abdul was in this state of indecision, and we were grovelling around in the encampment that I stumbled across a curious form of doctoring.

I found one of the camel men, half Mongol, half Tartar, writhing on the ground, covered with blood. At first I thought that he was the victim of some murderous attack, and as he moaned weakly for his

mother I surmised that his end could not be far distant.

I turned him over, and straightened him out by force, and discovered that there had been a thumb-pricking.

This may sound ludicrous, but there was an abundance of blood which indicated that the man had been well prepared for the operation. Many of the camel men set great store by this simple pricking, as they firmly believe it will relieve any kind of pain as well as cure any but the most outrageous of illnesses.

The operation is akin to the old custom of blood-letting. The arm of the victim is first massaged downward from the shoulder so that as much blood as possible is forced into the hand and the thumb. If performed efficiently this results in quite a swelling in the thumb, which is then pricked at the base of the nail. Why there, and not on the ball, I do not know, except perhaps the purpose is to make the operation more painful.

A surprising outlet of blood is secured by these means, and the victim is considered ungrateful if he does not quickly recover from his pains.

I suppose there is an affinity between this and another curious custom I came across later which is based on quite a sound knowledge of the nervous system. The theory of this latter system is that if a man has a pain in one place the pricking by a needle in another will relieve it, the idea being, of course, the neutralisation of the reaction of the nerve centres.

My camel man, however, had no such advanced

ideas. He firmly believed that he was assailed by a devil and that the massage on his arm was for the purpose of coaxing him down into his thumb. The pricking was not primarily to let blood, but to provide a hole through which the devil could escape.

From the way in which the fellow rolled about I suspected appendicitis, for he was in a profuse sweat and something was undoubtedly biting at his entrails.

A little judicious questioning, however, revealed the fact that his trouble was no more romantic than constipation. Bushes in the neighbourhood provided leaves similar to those we habitually collected in my own home for troubles of this character. I wandered forth and secured some, and steeped them in boiling water. I returned to the camel man, who was now convinced that he was at death's door. I forced open his lips and douched him with the fluid. His remarks indicated a profound belief that he was now through.

I edged beyond the range of his profanity, and left him to fight it out with my dosing, certain in the knowledge as to which would win.

I saw him again a few hours later, and he grinned weakly. Later he became rather a friend of mine.

Before we left Mashed I had the satisfaction of seeing Abdul bearded in his own den.

A holy Sayad appeared in the encampment, and informed Abdul that as a man of religion and peace he would bestow upon him the radiance of his company and see him through his journey in safety. Abdul, quite patently, was not impressed.

The Sayad, with much circumlocution, told Abdul what a good fellow he was, but now and again he made covert references to an old robe in Abdul's tent, respecting which he desired a reversion. At length, Abdul got rid of the man and gave orders that he was not again to be admitted to the camp.

Next day he was there again, having worn down all opposition, and he took a seat next to Abdul and treated him with the greatest familiarity. First he spoke to him as an equal. As his eloquence bore him away, he treated Abdul with condescension, and indicated that Abdul was in the running for high favour by so open-handedly playing the part of a beneficent host. As Abdul spent most of the time glaring at the Sayad this was rather far-fetched.

The Sayad progressed from condescension to insolence when he saw that nothing was forthcoming, and he stated his claims to charity in no uncertain language.

I could see the blood rushing to Abdul's head, for there was less than usual of the Moslem about him at that juncture, but he had to listen, for in Mashed to do to a Sayad all that which was in Abdul's mind would be asking for trouble.

When Abdul continued obdurate and dumb, the Sayad's remonstrances became even more pressing. He assured Abdul that he would guide him in safety, would work for him in the meanest way and would spend many hours in prayer. He asked for any little thing—clothes, a knife—just something, for to go empty away he could not.

Abdul ordered me to remove out of reach sundry

articles in the tent upon which the Sayad had thrown a roving eye, when the Sayad turned upon him and demanded to know whether he was suspected as a thief. His sturdiness and audacity were immense, and he wore down Abdul's patience.

Had we been at a distance from the holiness of Mashed, Abdul would have given the man short shrift. As it was he was forced, in the end, to give the old rascal money, merely to be rid of his presence.

It went sorely against the grain, and I took pains to make myself scarce. There was an angry look in Abdul's eye which presaged an outburst.

By his appearance next morning it was clear that he had punished a bottle.

It was the meanness of the people of Mashed which eventually compelled Abdul to depart.

He had done a certain amount of trading in the town, exchanging sundry goods for money and barter, and the inevitable was to happen. It is an old Mashed custom to bargain for goods, retain them for several days, and then to declare the sale off, because closer examination has proved them to be sub-standard and unworthy of the price that has been given. Always is this declaration backed up with the actual return of the articles, and a request for the money or the barter which has been exchanged.

The trick is an old one, more or less confined to the merchants of Mashed, their object being to open a new scale of bargaining and secure a considerable reduction in the prices paid.

Abdul had had several consignments returned, and in each case he had gone to the merchants and

protested. This, too, was all part of the custom. They had retaliated by insisting that he should retain the "sub-standard" goods, and return that which he had taken in exchange.

I had it in my heart to be sorry for 'Abdul until he suddenly gave the order to march just before midnight one night. Quickly the goods returned by the merchants were rebaled, hoisted on to the backs of camels, and we were away.

The merchants of Mashed had to sing for their money as well as the goods they affected to disparage.

It meant, however, that Mashed itself was closed to Abdul for the future.

CHAPTER XII

WE ARE AMBUSHED

ABDUL gave me a shock on our first halt from Mashed. I saw him saying his prayers.

I concluded from this that he was unduly worried.

When he had concluded his prostrations, he was in an amiable mood, and rather foolishly, perhaps, I asked him why he did not observe the Moslem rites more frequently.

Abdul was a scoundrel at heart, and had a reply for most awkward queries, and he was not in the least abashed.

He turned upon me with a knowing grin and asked me if it were not true that the Prophet had been a camel driver and a raider in his time.

I had to agree that that was so.

He then proceeded to propound his creed.

The Prophet, he assured me, was well aware of the hardships of the road, and he had indicated that all Moslems, when engaged on long journeys, could be absolved from the strict ritual of prayer.

Such is indeed mentioned in the Quran, but Abdul had added his own interpretation. I had to assume that as his life was an endless journey he considered himself under a full-time dispensation.

With his usual insolence and arrogance, he asked me if I had assumed the role of a Pir.

This was a direct snub, and one which he proceeded to rub well home.

With his coarse laugh he told me of a caravan man who had been persuaded to resume his devotions after a long interval of neglect. He began scrupulously to observe the ritual of five prayers a day.

Before many days had passed, his piety had become known, and robbers had denuded his caravan of two camels.

"Ah," said the caravan man when the loss was reported to him, "it is so long since I have made my presence known to Allah that he has forgotten me. I have recalled myself to his memory, and the loss of the two camels is a punishment for my long neglect. I must now pray for mercy."

He continued to pray, and more camels disappeared. Other camels went sick for want of attention, and his flocks and his horses strayed.

In the end the caravan man took counsel with himself.

"Allah," he cried, "does not desire to be pestered with the prayers of one who is so unworthy. Prayer, after so long an interval, cannot seem but strange. It would be well were Allah to forget me again."

And the caravan man ceased his prayers, tended his cattle, raided the robbers in their turn, and won back all that had been stolen from him, and much more.

That, in a nutshell, was Abdul's philosophy.

I do not know whether Abdul regarded that evening's news as proof of his beliefs, but from

stragglers struggling along the road we learned that a large caravan ahead of us had been cut to pieces, and that some fifty persons had been killed and as many taken off as prisoners and hostages.

No matter what forces were out in the hills, Abdul was committed. He could not return to the more or less friendly shelter of Mashed without blackening his face, for to have got the better of the Mashedes was a point of honour with him. He had to trust to his own strength and fighting prowess in order to win through.

Had he not such a valuable load with him, I do not think that Abdul would have worried over much, but in some way he was linked with the Eminence of Turkomania, and was patently anxious to carry out his commission.

We were making for a place by the name of Gulshan, a high valley where for all time the people have suffered severely in the agitation which has racked the country. Nominally under the jurisdiction of Persia, they really acknowledged no authority, and regarded anyone despatched to them from Teheran in the light of interlopers.

During the reigns of the late Shahs they looked upon the visit of Persian troops as the incursion of an enemy, and they had reasons. Times out of number the people had been pillaged and plundered by the very forces which had been sent to protect them from bandits. Their houses had been pulled down in order to provide wood for the troopers' fires, and their cattle had been killed and devoured without any semblance of compensation.

These people dreaded the appearance of Persian troops even more than they did the incursion of bandits. If anything, they preferred the latter, and wherever possible, fraternised with them.

In order to recoup themselves from the depredations of the periodical visits of Persian troops the people of Gulshan not infrequently did a little raiding and camel-lifting of their own.

Gulshan and the surrounding country is such that it has no real trade if one excepts the manufacture of the poshteen—sheep-skin coats to which I have already referred. The people merely trade or barter among themselves for their own domestic needs and their outside intercourse, as far as I could judge, was solely confined to the illegal inspection of caravans.

The poshteen manufactured by the people of this village in their more industrious moments is, however, worthy of mention because it differs so vitally from the rough and ready garment by the same name which is to be found upon the frontier of India and in the Afghanistan passes. The best of the coats are made from the skins of unweaned lambs, and some are so fine that they can be rolled into the size of an ordinary handkerchief. In the season there is a great slaughter of lambs in these parts.

It is near Gulshan, too, that the famous Nadir Shah was assassinated.

Abdul did not appear to be unduly perturbed by the evil reputation of the people of the village, and

when we encamped in the neighbourhood for the night, I discovered the reason. He had friends in the place. I might have surmised as much, for he had much in common with these turbulent townspeople.

We had not been encamped long before Abdul disappeared. Next morning he was missing from his tent—a remarkable occurrence in itself, but one which Umid accepted with solid phlegm.

Soon it went round that Abdul had been drinking with boon companions and had taken such potent doses of a spirit akin to brandy that he had taken to singing and dancing with the girls who had been provided for his entertainment.

The caravan was convulsed with the news, especially when it was seen that Umid was wearing a very grim expression which boded Abdul no good when he should eventually return.

It seemed, too, that Abdul, and his hosts, had become perfectly intoxicated and then, in a drunken frolic, had mounted horses, and, quite unmindful of the darkness, had gone off to spear pig.

Still later they returned, completely unsuccessful in their quest, and had fallen to the bottle again.

These libations were kept up for two days, during which Umid became more and more wintry.

We proceeded at length, and Abdul was as surly as a newly-caged tiger. He growled at everyone within reach, and I took care not to be one of them.

We went on like this for two days while Abdul was massaging a tortured liver by jerking to and fro upon a camel, and he seemed to have thrown off all fear of bandits.

On this morning he appeared cheerful, and smiling, and the caravan reflected his mood. All was laughter, and idle chatter when the caravan came to a sudden halt.

I was about twenty camels from the head, but I could see in the near distance six dark figures which had suddenly materialised.

The men were armed, and they remained quite still. The silence was uncanny.

Abdul pushed along the line, and examined the group. It was clear that he was unable to make up his mind. His excessive drinking had doubtless clouded his faculties to some extent.

He decided to give the men the sign of peace.

"Salaam Aleikum," he cried, but there was no answering response. The six figures remained there, practically motionless, and without saying a word.

The situation was extraordinary, to say the least, and it was Umid who supplied a diversion. She came lumbering up on her camel striking all within reach with a cane.

I watched her progress with some trepidation, for she was not weak in the wrist, though she was depending more upon her tongue for the purposes of castigation than her strong right hand.

"Oh," she cried with fury, as she forced home each stroke, "what is this? Look, you son of a

sheep, look! Was your mother a worm that you have no eyes?"

Whack! would go the heavy cane, and another would feel the weight of her wrath.

"Had your mother no honour? Were you born in the gutter of the bazaar?"

And to another:

"Blind one with a pig's brain, look! Look!"

Umid was not the one for an emergency. Her sense of direction was completely dissolved in vituperation. She was the world's champion scold, and she had the whole line of caravan men ducking and squirming and looking apprehensively at her switch.

She rumbled up to her lord and master, and pulled excitedly at his arm.

"What have you among your men," she screeched, "hairless ones just escaped from the purdah?"

Abdul threw her a malignant glance, for her tongue had been rattling at full pressure for the past several days and its strident cadences made him wince.

"Camel men!"

The biting scorn in her tone burned its acrid way through Abdul's phlegm, and he gave a gesture of anger.

"These begetters of imbeciles, they heed not——"

She swung her massive arms to indicate the rocks on her right. Abdul followed her gesture, but seemingly saw nothing. I, too, allowed my eye to roam over the rocks. There was no movement, but I

discerned a dull gleam in a fissure between two boulders which was eloquently informative.

I slipped off my camel, and ran, under cover of the line, to Abdul. I caught his eye, and whispered urgently to him.

"The men ahead," I said, "are there to distract attention. There are others up in the rocks, and we are covered!"

As soon as Abdul realised the situation, he did not hesitate. Had he not been recovering from a very deep debauch he would never have allowed himself to be caught in such a trap, but once in it, he was determined to fight his way out.

He gave a cry of rage, and urged his camel forward, calling upon his fighting men to follow him.

A thin rattle of musketry came from the rocks, and one camel went down screaming.

The men ahead levelled their guns and fired also, but Abdul went unscathed, and we surged forward.

There was more firing on our right, and figures began to appear among the rocks. Some of our men returned the fire.

I succeeded in scrambling back upon my animal in the press and regretted the fact that I was unarmed. There was that unmistakable smell of warm blood around one, and it got into my nostrils. In such circumstances, the primitive urge is to fight.

Even as this thought was passing through my mind, the man ahead of me reeled in his seat, and

sagged sideways on his camel. He had a curved sword in his hand, and this I snatched, more on impulse than with any idea of battling for Abdul.

Something in the subconscious told me, however, that it was better for Abdul to win out of this mess than for us to fall into the hands of the local banditry, and I allowed my frightened camel to charge its way forward.

I have a very indistinct memory of Abdul snapping away with his pistol, and of wildly flourishing swords. A man appeared in my path well mounted on a horse. I saw him fire, and my face was peppered with the black powder which he used, but the missile itself went wide. I felt my newly acquired sword do its work, and again there was wild flurry of sweating bodies, gurgling camels, snap-shooting and hacking.

How long this went on I am unable to say. Such affairs are invariably blurred in detail for all except, the onlookers, and from the manner in which my arm ached afterwards I am confident that I was no spectator.

All I recall is that the road ahead suddenly cleared, and that the camels, anxious to be away from the maddening smell of blood, broke into a panicky gallop. Such of the caravan which was still on its legs went forward, and the action was gradually broken off.

I would not call this a very gallant adventure for either side.

Abdul, well-knowing the state of the country,

had allowed himself to walk into an ambush. He had had the courage and the dash to fight his way out, but—at a very considerable loss.

The bandits, with everything in their hands, had failed to press home their initial advantage, and their attack, if not half-hearted, was not thrust in full measure.

This much was demonstrated when the camels panicked. The fire which they directed upon us was designed more to keep the camels on the run than to inflict further damage.

In this, perhaps they were wise, for there was plenty left for the picking. More than a dozen of Abdul's camels were strewn about the roadway, and five of his men there to keep them company, either dead, or so badly wounded that they were unable to move.

With us we had one of the bandits. By some extraordinary mischance he had sustained wounds in both arms, and was unable to guide the horse which he rode. I suppose that his wounds had rendered him so weak that he had failed to force his horse out of the stampede with his legs, for these men can ordinarily deflect their animals as easily with knee pressure as they can by their unmerciful tugging at the bridle.

Even when the camels had broken into a walk, we continued on our way for several miles before halting, and counting heads.

As I have said, five men were left behind. The number of camels deficient in the string proved to be fourteen, and amongst the latter all except two

of those which bore the baggage entrusted to Abdul by the Eminence.

It was a bad day, and Abdul gave himself up to raving and grief.

There was several hours of this, during which we endeavoured to make some sort of order in the caravan and the wounded attended to their hurts.

The camel men had rough and ready methods of dealing with these. One man had sustained an ugly gash across the temples. Someone heated crude sugar, and made it liquid, then the unfortunate was seized and placed upon the ground. Rough fingers prised apart his wound, and the hot sugar was poured in. Then it was bandaged.

I shudder now when I recall this crude way of rendering a dangerous and painful wound anti-septic.

During this operation, the wounded man said not a word. When the molten sugar was applied, he did not cry out. I saw him clench his hands, and he broke out into a profuse sweat. That was all.

After Abdul had rendered himself hoarse, he suddenly reverted to the philosophical.

He had the captured bandit dragged before him, and he spent a pleasant quarter of an hour telling him of the many diverse animals who had been his forbears.

Then, almost lazily, and without any appearance of haste, he scrambled to his feet, called for a two-edged dagger, and drew it caressingly across the unfortunate's throat.

The man dropped where he stood, and was dragged away, to pump out his life's blood.

An hour later I saw Abdul with one of his children on his knees.

He was playing with the youngster, and was popping sweetmeats into its mouth. Other children romped up, and he stuffed their eager mouths indiscriminately, occasionally wiping their sticky faces on his robe.

He caught sight of me, and beckoned me to him.

"You are a man of valour," he said smilingly, "and you do not hesitate to fight."

I dissembled, for I did not want the old scoundrel's praise. He was preening himself on the thought that I, a slave, had fought on his behalf. If I had waded in, it was more from a sense of protection of my own skin than of his.

Also, I was perturbed. The caravan had sustained heavy losses, and Abdul's treatment of the bandit had made it abundantly plain that there were to be no pourparlers with our attackers. There was to be no question of any ransom of any camel man who might conceivably be alive in their hands.

I was wondering whether my all-valuable papers had been in the baggage which had been lost.

I commiserated with Abdul on the losses he had sustained, but he only smiled, and tugged knowingly at his beard.

"It was the will of Allah," he said hypocritically.

I grunted in approval—one of those grunts which serve as an answer and which do not commit.

“Yes,” he went on, still smiling his wicked smile. “Allah has willed that I should be unable to carry out a certain commission for a man whom you know. It is impossible for me to deliver the remnant which remains. Therefore, I take it as the will of Allah that the remainder must be regarded as the spoils of war, and accrue to me!”

The wily Abdul! The remnant about which he spoke was contained in two camel loads. It must have been valuable, for his satisfaction was immense. He thought nothing of the loss of his camels in comparison, and the loss of five men was, of course, quite negligible and unworthy of comment.

“But,” I ventured, “your friend—what will he say?”

Abdul still stroked his beard, and chortled softly.

“Simpleton!”

He gazed up at me with his crafty eyes.

“Simpleton! Are the men of the south so foolish? The word will go round that Abdul has been attacked. There will be many camel skeletons picked white by the vultures to provide evidence of much fighting. It will be noised abroad that Abdul was despoiled of rich booty, as indeed he was, and—er—my friend will bemoan his loss and ring down praises on the valiant who fought so well and truly to safeguard his possessions.”

"But, will he not also hear that Abdul is well, and by extreme valour, is a victor over the nomads?"

Abdul inclined his head, and cocked an ear as if to make certain that Umid was not within ear-shot.

"He will not," he said pontifically. "Abdul has decided to forgo the pleasures of the accustomed routes, and to strike out elsewhere. Bokhara has a score up against me; so has Mashed. Seemingly, even Nishapur is a place to be shunned. But, there are others. . . ."

I liked not the trend of this conversation, but I could not push Abdul too far.

He popped more sweets into the mouths of his clamouring offspring, and again smiled upon me.

"You fought well," he said, "and I am pleased. He who wields the sword for Abdul has only to ask!"

My heart leaped, and my hopes must have been portrayed in my face.

" . . . for some things," he added enigmatically, as an afterthought.

"My papers," I ventured, greatly daring.

"Are quite safe!" Abdul inclined his head graciously, as if conferring a great favour.

"I was afraid," I stammered, "lest they should have been amongst the baggage left with the bandits."

"Pisht!" Abdul coughed. "There is an unspoken understanding between us that when the time comes these papers shall be returned to you.

In the meantime, you can rest assured that they are safe. With Abdul, it would not be otherwise!"

I thought of the camels laid out on our line of march, and was not so sure of Abdul's powers as a custodian, but I believed him when he said that my documents were not with the lost baggage.

He watched me narrowly, and as I pondered his words, he spoke.

"You have not yet asked for my favour," he said grandiloquently.

"No," I agreed. "You are fully aware of the only thing that will restore me to peace of mind and to my place among men, and you do not seem disposed——"

"In time . . . in time," Abdul interrupted. "You are valuable, and we are men short. I like you. You made a bargain, and you have kept it, even as I."

Abdul was referring to the fact that he still had my papers safely. He passed over, with benign complacency, other factors to the bargain. He did not even blink when he uttered the words, and I am doubtful if at that moment he even remembered the moment when he lifted a camel whip to me.

That, however, was not the time to remind him of such things. Indeed, no time would have been propitious for a discussion on such a subject as that, for Abdul was the most mercurial being I have ever met. He could smile one moment, and contemplate murder the next. And, with Abdul, there was small difference between thought and action.

"You are chary of asking my bounty!" Abdul leered at me. Not for long could he maintain a spirit of even friendliness and equality.

I remained silent.

"You shall retain the sword you wielded so well! You shall become of the fighters . . . though," he added inconsequently, "I think that there will not be so much fighting in the future. Still, one never knows. It is as Allah wills."

He distributed more sweets to the children, and nodded a dismissal.

Abdul had given me plenty of food for thought. Knowing some of his mental processes, I was tolerably certain that he was taking no risk in having me armed. He, the artful schemer that he was, knew in his turn that I would cogitate the point. Ordinarily, to have me possess the means readily to do him harm should the spirit so take me, would be the last thing which Abdul would contemplate. Therefore, quite unknown to me, he had had a strong hold over me all the time he had been with me.

And, his positive statement respecting the safety of my documents!

Enlightenment came to me at last, and I was uncertain whether to be relieved or angry.

Abdul had cached those papers in a safe place—probably he had left them with some agent in Bokhara or Samarkhand.

All the time I had imagined that they were with the caravan—possibly even on his person.

Abdul was a wily one, and I should have appreciated the point long since.

If he were suddenly to die, my interests would be ill-served. I began to have an inkling of the exacting obedience he was able to command of his men.

He had jockeyed me into that position where I was entirely dependent upon his goodwill.

I would have to play up.

CHAPTER XIII

HORSE!

MANY weeks passed, and Abdul seemed to have no purpose in his wanderings. As one of the so-called fighting men, my duties were not heavy. I was still required to take a turn at herding, but there were appreciable intervals between the turns. Whether or not Abdul became tired of my cooking which, I suspect, he had all along considered insipid, and as lacking the flavour of that imparted by the caravan cook, I do not know, but he gave up my culinary efforts when I was provided with a sword, although he was fully aware that I still prepared much of my own food.

There was only one incident in these many weeks—I had no means of telling the passing of the days—that is recalled to my mind, and that concerned an absurd quarrel which arose around the communal cooking pot.

We were encamped in the vicinity of a brackish lake at the time when a burst of bad language announced a scene between two of the camel men. Such incidents we regarded in the light of passing amusement, and we all gathered round to see what fun was going.

One of the men was a professed Moslem, and the other was more Tartar, and both had been tending

the camels. They had come in from their duties, and were squatted at the feeding bowl. There had been bad blood between the two for a long time, and now, it seemed, there had been an explosion.

The man, whom it is perhaps easiest to distinguish as the Tartar, had evidently said something derogatory to the Moslem, for the latter was piqued, and amidst his profanity, was gesticulating wildly, making an appeal to all who gathered in the circle.

Did not, he demanded, he wash himself the prescribed number of times a day? Had he not even adhered to this custom in the biting winds of the hill marches? Had he not even had the hardihood to use snow for this purpose?

No! He was not like this dog of an unbeliever. Had he (the Moslem) ever been seen to put his left hand into the pot? Had he ever been known to slip away behind the tents when there had been a pig-killing?

The latter insult was too much to be borne by the Tartar, who made a grab at his belt, and would have withdrawn his sword. His sitting posture made this difficult, and giving up the attempt, he leaned sideways, grasped one of the smaller camel whips, and smote the Moslem a hearty one over the head.

The latter relieved his injured feelings by throwing a handful of greasy soup into the Tartar's face. The Tartar spluttered, surprised by this method of retaliation, and sat there blinking for a moment. Then he leaned forward and caught the Moslem by his shirt, and tore it. The Moslem, not to be

outdone, grasped the Tartar's robe by the collar, gave a vicious tug, and ripped it right down the back.

This was a delightful interlude, and of the type of slap-dash buffoonery which appeals the world over. I have seen people who have paid real money laugh at this kind of thing when done upon the English stage.

The sound of the tearing made the Tartar more furious than ever, for he was something of a dandy in his way, and the garment bore some rich embroidery.

I can see the two combatants now as they sat here breathing stertorously. Suddenly, both leaped to their feet, and they had their knives out. Almost at the same instant, a lash came circling out of the darkness, and one of the men was disarmed.

Abdul, still unseen, sent his voice booming into the altercation.

"When you fight with knives," he said, "you fight for me, and with my permission. If you desire to slap one another like urchins of the bazaar, you may do so."

Both men, very much out of breath, fell apart, and the Moslem, as a sign of extreme contempt for his adversary, blew his nose with his fingers, and squatted on the ground. The Tartar, unable to think of anything better, performed the same operation, and squatted opposite him.

They glared at each other, and began a battle of words in which irreparable damage was done to the reputations of both forbears in the female line.

Sometimes, when one said something more than ordinarily outrageous, and the delighted crowd looking on roared its approval, the other would extend a hand and rip something more from the other's garments. It was a ludicrous scene, and one which, foolish though it was, diverted us immensely.

In the middle of it, and when the slanging match had been in progress for half an hour, the cook appeared and removed the pot. I suspect that he had been sent on that errand by Abdul who desired sleep, and had no wish further to interfere in the simple pleasures of the caravan.

Both men stopped short in their tirade, and looked at each other in comical consternation.

A little later, as I settled down for the night, I saw them, amicably enough, blowing at the same fire in an effort to prepare something which would appease the gnawing at their stomachs.

Slowly, Abdul worked northward, keeping well away from the better-known tracks. In the short, sharp encounter with the bandits his horse had been wounded, and though he employed every means at his disposal to treat the animal, it gradually began to take on an unhealthy colour. By this I mean that its coat, previously a glossy black, assumed almost a dull, dead bronze. Its muscles fell away, and it hung its head in utter dejection. Long after it was possible that it could recover, Abdul retained it in the caravan, and it was not until he began to talk of securing another that I began to suspect the reason for his seeming benevolence.

Apparently, on this occasion, he was prepared to part with real money in order to obtain what he wanted, and I accompanied him to several villages where he spied out possible mounts.

In most of these places, the surliness with which our advent was greeted gave way to smiles and hospitality as soon as our purpose was bruited abroad.

In one such village, the subject of a horse being mentioned, Abdul and I were seized by the arm and practically run into one of the mud-walled houses. The cheery scoundrel who had kidnapped us, waved us to the ground, rushed at an elderly relative reclining at his ease in the corner, snatched away the cushions upon which the venerable one was resting, and tucked them beneath us. His attentions could not have been more assiduous.

He had in his possession the most beautiful of all horses. Not only was it everything that a man of Abdul's undoubtedly high eminence could desire, but it had performed many wonderful feats and was the pride of the village.

Its owner shook his head doubtfully. He wondered if his fellow villagers, in their pride for this marvellous beast, would allow him to dispose of it.

While he was saying this he was chivvying his wife—a lady who was unveiled when we entered the apartment, but who hastily covered her non-existent charms when she realised that strangers had dropped in upon her. She seemed as pleased as a European housewife would have done if caught in similar circumstances.

BEYOND THE ANCIENT FORT AND FRONTIER TOWER RESTED OUR CARAVAN

She rushed round in a haze at the stern behests of her lord, and provided tea. She, poor creature, was not to know that we were possible purchasers of a horse, and she neglected to provide sugar.

Her husband soundly rated her, fawning on us the while, and sternly bade her produce sugar. From some inner recess she procured some, and would have favoured us each with a minute pinch. The horse-owner, to his wife's astonishment, and no little disgust, thrust his hand into the sugar, and regaled us with a huge quantity. Mrs. Horse-owner looked on aghast at this reckless extravagance.

It was an amusing vignette of domestic by-play, and one which was assured of a sequel once we had made our departure.

Abdul entered into the spirit of the thing, and told the man that he was certain that his horse was indeed a beautiful animal, but he had heard that there were some lovely beasts to be procured a day's march farther on.

While he was saying this sundry of the man's relatives slipped in from the street, one by one, and an animated conversation ensued between the members of the family regarding the accepted excellence of each of their horses and Abdul's probable inability to make their price.

It was then that the wily Abdul whispered into the horse-owner's ear: "We are staging a great feast in the camp to-night!"

The news created a sensation. Abdul followed it up.

"Yes," he said, "it is to be a horse. The animal is to be killed to-night, and we eat him."

All further talk of sale was suspended while the munificence of this stranger was debated.

Later, Abdul and I, and the entire family of the horse-owner repaired to the camp, where orders were given for the speedy despatch of the sorry beast which was Abdul's.

The villagers appeared with an enormous cauldron, and the carcase was suspended from a tripod over a fire.

The disgruntled housewife who had been so parsimonious with her sugar was voted to the position of cook, and as the carcase sizzled over the flames she cut huge slices from it and threw them into the cauldron.

I asked Abdul if there would be anything else to eat, such as rice, or a pillau, but he looked at me in surprise.

"A horse," he said. "A horse! What more could these people want than horse?"

Overhearing me, the horse-owner, whose "beautiful" animal we had yet to see, turned to me and licked his lips.

"Horse!" he muttered. "Horse! Praise be to Allah. There will be full stomachs to-night."

The housewife-cook had a long iron ladle in one hand with which she occasionally stirred the mess in the cauldron. Under her arm she carried an infant, which cried lustily every time she leaned over the smoke of the fire.

For the ninety-ninth time the horse-owner told

Abdul what a "beautiful" horse he had for sale, when his wife announced that the dish was ready and that the men could prepare themselves for the feast.

The party, with Abdul no whit behind, seated itself round the cauldron, and plunged in its hands.

The housewife stood by, and as meat was extracted she cut more and more from the roasted horse and dropped it into the great receptacle.

Where meat is concerned ordinary men have their limitations. I understand that the meat ration for the British soldier is one pound of flesh per day. These could have been no ordinary men, for each strived to outdo the other in gluttony. Pyjama strings and loin sashes were loosened from around protuberant stomachs, and the horse-owner seemed actually to swell.

The eaters became hoarse as they proceeded, not from talking, as none talked, but with that kind of hoarseness which affects some men when they imbibe too strongly of liquor. Their speech became thick, and I was struck by the affinity of excess through over-eating and over-drinking.

Abdul held his own—more than held his own, for the horse-owner seemed to consider it his duty to regale him with all the choicest morsels. He would dip an arm into the cauldron and despatch his fingers on an exploratory search. Successful, he would hold the meat at arm's length and dangle it in front of Abdul's glazing eyes, as a kind of warning of what was about to happen. He would then ram the flesh into Abdul's sagging jaws, and with a

convulsive effort, resembling that of a vulture gulping down carrion, Abdul would force the meat down into his gullet without any chewing or the slightest attempt at mastication. He appeared as nothing less than a human boa constrictor, for his neck would bulge for several seconds during the passage of the meat to that extraordinary container which was his stomach.

After every such offering Abdul would belch loudly and fiercely in order to demonstrate how highly he appreciated the compliment which had been paid him.

The gorging went on all through the night, and when morning came the company had disposed of an entire horse.

In the meantime, the "beautiful" steed had been sent for from some distant pasture, and when it arrived, it was escorted by most of the residents of the village who had appeared, doubtless in the hope that the horse content of Abdul and the horse-owner's family had been unequal to an entire animal. They were disappointed, and did not hesitate to say so.

Other motives besides the desire for cooked horse meat then became obvious.

There was one man who seized upon me as being the only one in the camp not drunk with an overfill of meat. He made comical and absurd faces at the steed produced for sale, to signify his disgust. When the owner happened to turn his bloodshot eyes in his direction the man simpered and smiled. Evidently the owner was something of importance

in the village and the man, while "knocking" the horse, still desired to do so with circumspection. I doubt whether any of the eaters could have taken in any by-play, however. They had literally eaten themselves silly.

The horse, by the way, completely failed to come up to expectations—my expectations, anyway. A great deal of ceremonial had attended its coming, and thousands of words had been diffused in extolling its points and value.

It was lame on one foreleg without the slightest question, and from where I sat I suspected that it had been fired. When I looked more closely I thought at first that I had glazed eyes on the brain. But, no. It undoubtedly had a film over its near eye. When I placed a hand over its other, and made pretence to hit it over the head, it did not flinch or even twitch an ear.

Even Abdul was not too far gone to be unable to see at a glance that the horse was unsuitable, but he did not seem unduly perturbed.

He merely waved it away, and said in a conversational way to the owner: "Some lame cast-off has strayed into the camp. How knock-kneed and thin it appears against the beautiful animal which you have promised me!"

The unlovely beast was dragged away, and in time another appeared. This was better, but not much.

For the succeeding eight hours horses were brought into the camp, the upward trend of each being slight, but at least upward.

In the end Abdul bought one which was neither beautiful nor, to my mind, even sturdy, but it cost a ridiculous price, so that the feast was not altogether wasted.

After Abdul had recovered from the horse-killing we continued to push northward, and the town of Khiva began to be mentioned in the caravan. It was known that the place was over-run with men of the marauding type, and I wondered why Abdul should take the risk attending this steady push northward. If he had valuable baggage with him the very last persons whom he would desire to interrogate him would be the so-called "troops" of the Soviet then rampaging through the country. Abdul, however, knew his own mind, and seemed well able to take care of himself.

I noticed, as we slowly made our way northward, that Abdul doubled his precautions. The people whom we met were more friendly and less aggressive than those further south, and our arms were less in evidence.

Abdul took to detailing digging parties at our various halts, and in the holes which we made he temporarily buried anything that would be likely to arouse the cupidity of some Red commander. The same with the more modern of the arms. All that were retained for outward display were old-fashioned weapons such as any nomadic band might expect to carry.

The people whom we met in the scattered villages and encampments, though they talked of little else but the great change-over in the country of the

Czars, were little affected by the rise of Communism. The first tiny wavelets had reached them, but they had caused no more than a ripple in their daily lives.

The people were mainly sheep breeders. Perhaps that is why they eat so little mutton. For most of the year they consider it criminal extravagance to indulge in any meat in form, and it is only when strangers arrive that they slay from their flock to dispense hospitality.

It is a day long to be remembered when a sheep is killed. The people do not receive many visitors, for there is little to appeal in the country which they inhabit, but when strangers do arrive, they make the most of the occasion.

We of the caravan were invariably most hospitably received, and always were we begged to prolong our halts.

I had several opportunities of observing the marriage customs of this very likeable race, who know hardly anything of money and think only in terms of sheep.

More often than not the would-be husband struck his own bargain with the bride's father, instead, as is more usual further south, for the arrangements to be carried through entirely by the parents.

Having arranged the affair, the bridegroom departs for several days, to return on a fixed date for his bride who sits in her tent, singing of her own charms and of her lover's bravery.

It is incumbent, by the way, on the bridegroom to make these journeys unaccompanied, irrespective of

the condition of the country through which he has to pass. He must ignore the presence of brigands and bandits in order to demonstrate to his bride that he is really worthy of the song she makes up in his honour.

Having accomplished a ride which may or may not have put his courage to the test, the groom is required to face the ordeal of the assembled women of the tribe who sit in a circle round the girl's tent with sticks.

It is the groom's task to break through this cordon in order to reach his beloved.

I could not help but notice that the ladies armed with the heaviest sticks, and those who laid home with full vigour, were the unmarried and the least favoured in looks. In the encounters which I witnessed there was real feminine venom in the belabouring of the unfortunate groom.

However, in every instance the man won to the tent, and his bride, but the tribeswomen were not finished. Their part of the entertainment went on for hours. They remained squatting in a circle round the bridal tent chanting songs in which the pleasures of the bridal couch were shamelessly and indecorously lauded.

Afterwards there would be feasting, friends coming in for many miles around. Each person of consequence brought a sheep as a contribution to the entertainment. This was a sensible custom, for otherwise the bride's father would have been rendered destitute, so much did these people pack away. Not only did they gorge their stomachs to the last shuddering

mouthful, but they tied rope or grasses round their trousers at the knee and stuffed meat into this hastily improvised receptacle that they might eat further after their departure.

After the feasting, there were invariably games, the principal diversion being wrestling among the younger men, with even more meat in lieu of prizes.

After the games there came riding, in which the men would race against each other. When the men tired of this, some of the younger women would mount, and always the fastest and the most spirited of the horses.

In these affairs one could see the trend of future romances. A girl would challenge the men to race her. In the pursuit, efforts would be made by the men to place an arm around her waist. It was the custom for the girl to belabour her admirer with a whip, in order to keep him at bay, this exhibition of maidenly modesty being much applauded by the rest of the male riders, as it was an understood thing that the man could not retaliate in kind. If the wrong suitor took up the chase, as was sometimes the case, the girl rider would give the luckless male such a castigation that he had no other recourse but to fall from his horse to avoid further punishment. When this occurred, the rejected one usually made haste to depart the camp, for he was an object of derision and scorn to the rest of the guests.

On the other hand, if the man's attentions were favoured, the girl took good care to ensure that the whip did not act as an insuperable deterrent. A clasp round the waist, and the girl surrendered at

once. The man, for his part, would follow up his advantage by touching the girl on the breast. Then they would ride off together amidst the encouraging shouts of the men, and the tittering of the women.

Thereafter, the man was in honour bound to approach the father and discuss the difficult matter of sheep.

I saw one such ceremony where the belle of the tribe had a crowd of suitors at her heels, and the decision as to whom was to be given the opportunity of discussing sheep was settled by the custom of riding.

The whole tribe turned out to watch this primitive wooing. The girl, allowed a choice of horses, galloped away, and at a given signal her swains were after her in a pack. She swerved her mount to elude those she disliked, and struck with her whip those who would not accept the hint. All the time she attempted to throw herself into the way of a well-favoured youth who, it seemed, was the shyest and most diffident of the pack. This made the chase all the more interesting, for there were a number of ardent wooers in the gang who refused to be rebuffed either by whip-lashings or horsemanship.

It is pleasing but perhaps almost unnecessary to relate that the girl got her man in the end.

CHAPTER XIV

KHIVA

It was when Abdul decided to purchase a sheep at one of the tribal encampments that it was made manifest to me how parsimonious are these people in respect to meat, except of course, on the occasions of marriage and other great festivals.

Abdul had no intention of stopping at this encampment, and made this clear, so that the people had no excuse for a killing for the entertainment of strangers.

His nonchalant statement that he was prepared to purchase a sheep for the caravan, however, created a profound sensation, and the entire tribe crowded round him to gaze upon a curiosity, and a fabulously rich one at that.

Abdul apportioned me to do the bargaining, and a saucy-eyed girl immediately volunteered to direct me to the fold. She was undoubtedly pretty, and was of more southern origin. From the shameless manner in which she used her eyes she seemed to be well aware of the fact.

The girl hurried forward, and entered the fold. With a quick movement, she caught a protesting sheep by the hind leg, and turned him over on his back.

She gave the unfortunate animal a terrific thump in the stomach, and gurgled the one word, "Fat!"

She looked up at me and ogled, and I hastily agreed that it was fat.

She seemed disappointed, and I am sure that I went down very far in her estimation, for with a toss of her head, she turned the sheep over, and clasping him round the neck, dragged him toward the encampment.

Abdul eyed me amusedly as we made our appearance, and complimented me satirically with the despatch with which I had carried out the bargaining.

The girl's father invited Abdul into his tent to conclude the purchase, and Abdul beckoned to me to follow. We were provided with cushions, and requested to partake of tobacco by sucking at a brass-bound hookah which contained the most pungent weed I have ever been required to smoke.

Our host informed us that there were numerous bands of Reds in the surrounding country, and he strongly advised us to parade nothing that might be of value lest we should be required to give proof of honourable possession—something, he added, naively, which was sometimes difficult.

I felt my lips twitching as he made this remark, but Abdul agreed with him with the gravity of a judge, and questioned him closely as to the best means of tempering the zeal of the Soviet soldiery should we be so unfortunate as to fall in with them.

"Be poor," the man replied cryptically. "If those camels and horses be your own property, produce papers to show that they belong to another. It matters not what papers you produce, for none of these men can read. But the owner must be a big

khan from across the borders. The Red soldiers have orders to be careful in their relations with the servants of such.

"As for your baggage!" Our host shook his head. This problem seemed utterly beyond him, and knowing what store Abdul set by some of his loot, I almost found it in my heart to be sorry for him.

I noticed, however, that our approaches to Khiva were made by shorter and shorter marches. Whenever we halted, the valuable baggage was buried. In the day we only marched after scouts had gone ahead and reported the country clear. Some strong impulse was undoubtedly drawing Abdul to Khiva, because the risk he was taking was a real one.

However, his cautious tactics pulled him through, and his final halt was made a good day's march from the town.

Here he again buried the baggage, and posed as a caravan master on his way to Khiva to collect goods for Bokhara.

I was rather surprised when Abdul informed me that he required me to ride into the town and possibly to spend several days there. My mission was to seek out a merchant, and I was to do so without attracting undue attention.

The merchant's name was Nazar Din, and I was to instruct him that Abdul lay encamped a day's march from the town.

Evidently Nazar Din and Abdul knew one another, for Abdul did not consider it necessary to give me more detailed instructions, or to inform Nazar Din why he was lying some distance from Khiva.

On the morrow I set out on Abdul's horse, not at all certain of the reception I should be accorded. For the first time for many months I felt the feel of silver. Abdul had pressed some into my hand on leaving, for "contingencies."

I had not ridden far before I began to make out minarets and domes in the distance, and on closer inspection, the former proved to be ornately painted, and the latter composed of highly coloured tiles. There were plenty of orchards round the town, and any number of mulberry trees.

The city itself I found to have two dilapidated walls, on the outside of which were undulating cemeteries with thousands of white tombs and sepulchres.

I found the streets broad and clean, and many of the houses built of polished bricks and coloured tiles. There was a bazaar over which there were thin rafters matted with straw, and it was here that I thought I would find my merchant.

Abdul had enjoined caution, and I had to proceed warily. I could not go through the streets shouting lustily the name of Nazar Din, and the few whom I hazarded to ask affected never to have heard of the name. There were Nazar Dins, of course, but Nazar Din, merchant, seemed to be beyond them.

There is one similarity between the East and the West, and this I determined to exploit. There are certain professions which are associated with news and gossip. In England, if a man yearns for a "straight" tip on a race, he visits his barber. In

Khiva, the thing to do if you require information is to take a bath.

I enquired the way to the bath with no great feeling of optimism as to its appointments, but I was to be agreeably surprised. I was in no mood to be captious or critical, for I had a longing to be thoroughly clean, quite regardless of the conditions under which this was to be attained. I need not have worried.

The bath turned out to be composed of a series of rooms each with a vaulted roof in which were rough divans constructed of clay and covered with cushions and rugs.

The bathkeeper rose on my entrance, and immediately offered me a hookah. Remembering the strength of the tobacco at a previous smoking, I declined the proffered honour on the plea that I had a weak throat.

The offer of the hookah was on the same plane as the cigarette which is frequently tendered by attendants in the Turkish baths of the West, but the rest of the arrangements, if equally ablutionary, proved to be rather more primitive.

I was invited into a second chamber where there burned a large charcoal fire. On the fire were a number of stones which were at a white heat. The bathkeeper removed the stones with immense iron tongs and threw them on the ground. He then produced several buckets of water and threw the water on the stones. A dense steam was the result, and hastily I removed my garments. By means of bellows without the charcoal was brought into intense

life and the place got hotter and hotter. I underwent this rigorous treatment for half an hour, at the end of which time the heavy curtain leading to a third apartment was suddenly thrust on one side and the bathkeeper appeared with a bucket of water. There was ice floating on the surface, and before I could divine his purpose, and stop him, he had soused me. Gasping and choking, I was led to the third apartment where I expected massage and bone-kneading, but none was forthcoming.

The bathkeeper merely squatted nearby with his hookah and chatted.

He, however, had never heard of Nazar Din, merchant.

For the moment I was frustrated.

The bathkeeper, it seemed, was not particularly interested in the people of Khiva, although he was the custodian of much of the town's gossip. From the look of things he did not appear to be too prosperous, and I had to conclude that the Khivans were not among those who made a fetish of washing.

It was while I was idly talking that the bathkeeper gave me an idea. He remarked upon my hair, which he thought extraordinary, as the majority of Khivans shave the tops of their heads.

Since being with Abdul I had had no opportunity of shaving. Personally I like a clean-shaven chin, and I told the bath keeper as much. This he appeared to regard as even more remarkable than the hair on my head. Khivans, he explained, never shaved their chins.

However, I both wanted to be shaved and to question the barber, and I asked the bath man to direct me.

Regarding me as something which had escaped from a freak show, he complied.

I set out through the streets, but the bathkeeper was a chatty soul, and told sundry of his friends that he had just bathed a man from the south who was determined to have his chin shaved. The news caused considerable excitement, and as I wended my way through the bazaars I was followed by a curious crowd. Women continually flitted by me taking sly glances through the corners of their veils, and I heard more than one excited titter.

When I arrived at the barber's shop there must have been half a hundred people in my wake, and I began to feel embarrassed.

"Will you have your head shaved?" The barber rubbed the glossy surface of his own knob, and looked dispirited when I merely requested him to try his hand on my beard.

I glanced toward the roadway, to discover that the crowd had now greatly increased. Half the merchants had left their stalls, and a minor riot was proceeding for front positions from which to view the extraordinary sight of a man from the south about to have his chin shaved.

I began to feel acutely nervous, for it struck me that if the barber was at all fanatical, he might seek to improve the occasion by slitting my throat in the belief that I was an Unbeliever. However, having gone so far I had to proceed. I think that

if I had disappointed the jostling, excited throng without I should have been lynched on the spot.

The barber, meanwhile was engaged in rubbing a piece of thin iron upon a stone. It resembled a long "cut-throat" which had just come from the hands of a rough-handed blacksmith. The handle was like the prong which sometimes emerges from the ivory handle of a dinner knife. However, neither the knife nor the preliminaries intimidated me, for I had been shaved by such means before, when in India, and I knew that the seemingly rough strip of metal, which might have come in the first place from a section of iron hooping, could be whetted up to an amazing keenness.

What did give me pause, however, was the reaction of the barber to the growing excitement of the mob. Accustomed only to a small "gallery" of patient or impatient customers, the throng outside, which was now engaged in remarks of a very personal nature, was edging him off his poise. As he momentarily lifted his razor from the stone I could see his hand trembling. He had no light job ahead of him if he was to remove my rubble without blood-letting, and the outlook was dark.

The Khivans in the street evidently decided to make a day of it. One crowd begets another, no matter in what part of the world the first congregates, and there were angry cries in the distance from those who were unable to see the man from Hindustan bereft of his whiskers.

In a London theatre there would have been requests for those in the front to remove their hats.

Here there were rough demands for those nearest the shop to sit down in the roadway. Those so requested, complied, and from the street came the pleased anticipatory "Ah's" of an audience watching the rise of a curtain on some great stage spectacle.

I had expected that the barber would initiate his attack upon my unkempt beard with a pair of scissors, no matter how crude the implements, but I was in for a shock.

Desisting from his attentions to the whetstone, he suddenly seized me in a firm grip, and disdaining any pretence of plying either water or lather, he fell to the attack.

He took what I considered to be an unfair advantage in that he had the ball of one thumb pressed firmly over my eye, and movement was impossible. I was completely at his mercy.

Perhaps it was as well, for the first slashing attack on well matured bristles was an agonising process, and the so-called razor did not cut, as I had expected it would, but delved and excavated, and tore up by the roots.

I squirmed under the treatment, and the sadists without screamed their appreciation.

The barber, unused to such applause, allowed the reception to go to his head, and he fell to with the vigour of a hay cutter with a scythe. I opened my mouth to make an agonised protest, and the result was fatal.

The razor cut a deep gash into my cheek, and the audience roared its laughter.

It was a great day for Khiva.

I was reminded of this incident only this morning when shaving in my mirror. The scar presented by the Khivan barber is not yet entirely obliterated.

My self-sought tortures were not entirely without effect, for it transpired that the barber had heard of Nazar Din, merchant, and was indeed able to direct me to his abode on the outskirts of the town.

I repaired there as soon as the crowd had sufficiently dispersed, and was fortunate in finding Nazar Din at home.

At the mention of the name of Abdul he first looked at me suspiciously, but, apparently satisfied, he bade me enter.

Hearing that I had a horse hitched in the bazaar, he gave orders to his servants to fetch it.

I was led into a large room, one end of which was covered with thick carpets. In the room's centre, there was bare earth and upon the earth a charcoal fire.

Over the fire was a cauldron, richly enamelled and chased. The vessel had a long neck, and was easily tilted.

I was invited to use some of the hot water it contained in order to wash my hands.

I was afraid that Nazar Din, in affording me this honour, would entertain doubts as to my position, and calling him on one side I explained that I was but Abdul's "servant."

He gazed at me quizzically for a moment, and smiled.

"You are here on behalf of my friend Abdul,"



ONE OF OUR OTHER METHODS OF TRANSPORT

he said. "Come!" And he tilted the water into my palms with his own hands.

Nazar Din begged to be excused after a time and retired. He returned shortly afterwards with a dish on which reposed roast mutton and a savoury pillau. Servants followed him with further dishes containing cooked eggs, and bread. Pitchers containing water and milk were brought in by others.

The *pièce de resistance* was an enormous melon something like the proverbial pumpkin which was turned into a house.

Yet another servant carried a brightly coloured cushion. On this I was invited to repose myself, and all the dishes, not forgetting the mountainous melon, were placed at my feet.

I was slightly surprised when Nazar Din again excused himself, and made to retire, but just in time I bethought myself of an old Khivan custom regarding which I had heard whispers.

I rose from my cushion and crossed the room to a divan. I took the brightest cushion I could find, and walked sedately back and placed it alongside mine.

With a pleased smile, Nazar Din accepted the implied offer, and sat down beside me.

Courtesy, however, was as yet to be outdone.

Nazar Din scouted round the dishes, and offered all the most succulent portions to me. Not to be behindhand in graciousness, if he explored one side of a platter, I reconnoitred the other, and for the next few minutes we were engaged in feeding one the other.

Eventually, honour satisfied, we fell to in earnest.

The melon, which I had expected to be coarse and flavourless because of its size, proved to be an agreeable surprise. It had all the attributes of the famous canteloupe, and I sunk my teeth deeply.

Nazar Din, observing my appreciation, told me that in the old days the Khivan melons had been sent as far afield as Peking and St. Petersburg for the delectation of the Emperors, and that the monster now dwindling before us was not unusual in size. Quite an ordinary weight, he assured me, was forty pounds. The one we attacked with such determination I should have gauged at thirty pounds.

Before that night was over I had cause to wish that this particular melon had travelled afar. I had been so long without fruit of any kind, and had made such a beast of myself with the luscious flesh, that my night was a wakeful one.

Nazar Din asked me how Abdul had been faring, and I told him that which I thought he should know.

Learning from my remarks that I had travelled in India and in England he asked me the most amazing questions.

England, he thought to be a small island not far to the southward of India populated entirely by fat capitalists who gave up a portion of the money they secured from usury to provide immense battle-ships and armies to keep workers in subjugation.

He believed that the people of India were fervently awaiting the arrival of the Russians in order that they might throw off the yoke of the oppressors.

I asked him how the country roundabout was faring under the Reds, and he admitted that food was scarce, and that there was much forced labour.

I asked him how he succeeded in retaining his wealth, and he admitted that he bribed heavily.

The Russian propagandists had been busy in Khiva.

I left Nazar Din the next morning and returned to the encampment.

Altogether we remained in this part of the country for a month, during which time there was considerable intercourse between Nazar Din and Abdul. Evidently the business side of the arrangements which they made were satisfactory to both. Abdul at least, went about with a pleased smile.

All the goods which he had thought necessary to bury in the sands were successfull, passed over to Nazar Din on successive nights, and Abdul was left with the lightest of light caravans.

Even after the transfer of this mysterious baggage, we remained, and Nazar Din and Abdul were frequently in communion.

At long last, Abdul again gave the order to march.

CHAPTER XV

PILGRIMS

WE ambled on easily, and crossed the Oxus, which confirmed me in my belief that we were marching eastward.

Abdul gave no sign of the nature of the trek, and he appeared to be in no vast hurry. We marched into the Kutuji mountains and watered at a number of exceedingly bitter wells. We progressed through the wearing Kizil Kum desert to Tak, and after nearly five weeks' travelling came to the outskirts of Turkestan. Here, after recuperating, for some of the camels were in a bad way notwithstanding the lightness of their loads, Abdul suddenly marched south. We kept away from the main road and reached Chemkent in six days. Here we halted for three days and then proceeded, and came in sight of Tashkent in another four.

We had been on the environs of Tashkent for less than half an hour when some very fiery gentlemen dashed up on horses. They proved to be members of the famous Ogpu, and they put Abdul through a thorough cross-examination.

They insisted on every bale of baggage being opened, but Abdul remained quite unperturbed. He had nothing with him which would excite their cupidity. I believe he never halted at an encamp-

ment even for half an hour without burying his money.

I was amazed at the manner¹ in which Abdul met these dreaded agents of the Soviet. He complied with their curt requests to open his baggage, but his attitude was very off-hand, nevertheless.

If they were curt, he was arrogant and rude. If they were churlish, he showed his teeth.

All the sensational stories I had read about the tortures inflicted by the Ogpu rushed through my mind, but Abdul was no fool.

He insisted that he was a thoroughly honest caravan trader from Afghanistan, and as the Soviet were then wooing the authorities in Kabul with an astonishing fervour, the Ogpu gentlemen changed their tune. Evidently, they had had orders not unduly to browbeat the subjects of Amanullah.

Grudgingly, they allowed the men to remake the bales, and consented with ill-grace to the caravan resting where it had encamped.

Orders were given, however, that a responsible person would have to attend the Ogpu headquarters in Tashkent on the morrow in order that papers should be provided, and everything put in order.

Abdul glanced at me, and I knew that I was to be accorded the dubious honour of visiting the city.

On the morrow, I went, and I was amazed at what I saw in the old town which was fast losing its charm under the forceful ways of the Red regime. Wide straight roads were being cut, and it did not seem to matter what came in the way of the straight

line. Houses and half houses were demolished and I saw more than one family still precariously perched upon a platform that had once been a room. The roadmakers had removed most of the walls. This, then, was progress.

Pictures of Lenin were everywhere to be seen, and there was but little activity in the bazaars. Tashkent had been under the Czars for roughly half a century, but it had retained the even tenor of its ways. It had allowed Westernism to seep in through its walls, but it had preserved its old courtesy and dignity.

It was something like a big Indian city such as Bombay or Delhi. In Delhi, there is electric light, and there are trams, but even the trams have not changed the characteristics of the famous Chandi Chowk. It is still essentially a bazaar, and a very fine one at that. A mile away there are the fine hotels with their dance floors and porcelain baths, but Delhi itself remains much as it was in the days of the Moghuls.

So it was with Tashkent before the Revolution, but when I walked into it the thriving trade of the bazaars was being concentrated into a number of co-operative stores which had an unpleasant "take it or leave it" atmosphere. To deprive the people of Tashkent of the pleasure of bargaining was one of the first steps toward "modernization."

Soldiers stalked everywhere when I entered Tashkent, and I saw quite a number of persons being rushed through the streets in handcuffs. I was told that they were recalcitrant workers who were tired

of the black rye bread which they were forced to eat under the ægis of Bolshevism, and had loudly demanded the millet to which they had been accustomed since birth.

I lost my way in the labyrinth of houses in the old town, but even here the Ogpu had been busy. Every house I noticed, bore a conspicuous number, and doubtless every one of the inhabitants had been duly tabulated.

Eventually I sat down at a small café, and drank tea, and I talked with a number of men who had thoroughly imbued the "comradely" attitude. This was not the pleasant, good-humoured assumption of equality which is the characteristic of every true Cockney, but an aggressive gaucherie built up on a long-cherished inferior complex.

It is hardly necessary, for instance, to spit copiously within an inch of a comrade's toes in order to demonstrate that the social plane is equal, yet this, as far as I could discover, was the sign manual of all those who had gone over to the new order. Needless to say these persons were young and of the student class. An overdose of Red politics had unbalanced their minds.

Those of the older generation were not so enamoured of the new order of things. They assured me that in order to get anything, even tickets for necessities like potatoes, it was always advisable to bribe.

Listening to these people I was the more amazed that Abdul had got off so lightly when the Ogpu came charging down on him, for I was told more

than one story of confiscation for which, it seemed, there was no redress.

One man had made a journey into the country where he could procure butter from a relative. On the way back he was stopped as he entered the town. An official took his butter, and when he complained he was handcuffed, marched through the streets as a malefactor, soundly beaten, and released with the assurance that he was fortunate still to be alive.

Another man told me that he had been despoiled of fruit, and another of his coat. Obviously one had to proceed warily when dealing with these gentry.

I was told that I would be treated with some courtesy as I was a foreigner, yet it was still with some trepidation that I made my way to the offices of the Ogpu. A small boy directed my steps, and he lisped words in Russian as we walked. He was extraordinarily proud of his prowess. He was uncertain of the meaning of the phrases, but he told me that he had been commended in his class for his diligence. I gathered, though I could not be certain, that the children were taught Soviet slogans which they were ordered to repeat a stated number of times a day in the presence of their parents.

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings!

The Ogpu building I found to be a huge affair, but entry was not easy. I discovered that in order to make one's way into the precincts a preliminary paper was necessary. This was to be obtained from a barbed hole like that at a railway station ticket

window behind which sat many men of stern mien and autocratic manner.

When I explained that I desired to enter the OGPU office the man who demanded my business so brusquely laughed rudely in my face. When I told him that I did not care either for his manner or his type of beauty, he glared angrily, and those with him muttered ominously. There was a freemasonry and camaraderie among the bureaucrats, if nothing else.

My heated "come-back" caused a minor sensation in my rear, and a rout among those who had queued up behind me. Quite obviously, those whose business also brought them to the pigeon-hole had no desire to be seen even on the shadow of one who had the temerity to answer back Tashkent's Red masters.

I explained to a heated phalanx that tried to glare me down through the bars that I was not a resident of Central Asia, and had relatives of consequence at the court of several Oriental Kings.

The chief interlocutor calmed down somewhat, and assured me that he was glad to see me.

The two liars then gazed at each other with a little more respect, I because I had put one over, and he because he considered he was dealing with a person of eminence who might perhaps speak well of him in the right quarter.

"Your name," he asked, dipping his pen into a great leaden inkwell. I gave it glibly enough, even rattling off an assumed title which would have given me the entre even into Viceregal Lodge in Delhi.

Russians are accustomed to long names, but this one was beyond him, and while he struggled with his pen, and I assisted him in his spelling, I was able to digress upon the fulness and flavour of my pseudonym while the assembled bureaucrats took it all in with flapping ears.

"Do I put 'His Highness' in the column marked 'designation'?"

The fellow might have been a Communist, but he could not have been more obsequious.

"It doesn't matter," I replied grandly. "Titles mean nothing in your country. Just put down 'gentleman'!"

The man sniggered. "I will put 'His Highness'," and he wrote steadily in Russian.

He came nearer to the bars and whispered.

"You have the ear of the King in Kabul?"

"Assuredly!" I looked as important as was possible while crouching down to the wicket.

"And it is possible to put in a good word with the Commissar there?"

I nodded my assent.

"I will sign my name carefully on this document . . . there are good posts to be had in the Afghan capital," and he leered at me knowingly.

"I will take the utmost care of the paper, and speak well of your treatment!"

I took the proffered document with an air, and prepared to depart, but the man dashed from the wicket and rushed round to meet me. He oozed friendliness, and caught me by the arm. He smiled

sweetly, and there was none of the gobbing comradesliness which I had come to associate with all good Communists.

"Come, Your Highness, I will show you the way. There shall be no delays for you. . . . Perhaps when you reach Kabul you can say how efficient is the bureau here, and how well other nationals are treated. Tell the Commissar how you were impressed with Soviet efficiency . . . and mention my name."

He squeezed my arm, and I was led through a side door into a vast office where typewriters were clicking at a maddening pace.

I was led into a room where my self-appointed guide had a brief conversation with a man at a desk.

The man rose, and walked over toward me. He bowed, and I gravely returned his salutation.

"I understand, Your Highness, that you are with a caravan encamped beyond the city."

I signified my agreement.

"What is your business?"

I could see that this official was more businesslike than the other, and I had to proceed cautiously. My reply, however, was glib enough. I could see him asking me why I, as a person of some eminence, was skulking round with a string of disreputable camels.

"We have been on a pilgrimage to Meshad, and we are returning to Afghanistan."

"And, your route from here?"

"Via Kokan."

The man nodded gravely, returned to his desk, and made out the necessary papers.

The terrible Ogpu had been bearded in its lair, and I was anxious to be going. I dreaded more questions which I might not parry with such readiness.

Once more I bowed gravely, and was allowed to depart.

Abdul was mystified with the papers which I gave into his possession on my return to the encampment, but he was anxious to know all that had befallen me.

Carefully omitting all mention of my dizzy rise in rank, I told him how I had informed the Ogpu that our caravan had been engaged in a religious pilgrimage, and he roared with laughter. His mirth, I thought, was more than the situation justified, but I was unable to see into Abdul's mind and I had yet to learn the reason for his long march from Khiva.

He was not so pleased when I informed him that the papers had been made out to include Kokan, but he agreed, readily enough, that I could have done little more in the circumstances.

"We do not go via Kokan," he said. "We certainly proceed in that direction, and that will be sufficient to pull the hair over the eyes of these Reds. After that—we lose the papers. If we are stopped again, there will be a fresh tale to tell."

I thought that matters could be rendered so much more simple if only Abdul would divulge his plans, but he was secretive, and vouchsafed no further comment. I left him, sorely puzzled.

I had no doubt in my mind that he and Nazar Din had worked out some profitable scheme together when they communed one with the other in Khiva. I guessed that it boded no good for the other parties to the bargain, but I did not know then, and did not realise it until long afterwards, how foul was the plan they had conceived.

Even Abdul's uproarious laughter when I mentioned the subject of a religious pilgrimage gave me no clue, and I am amazed now to think that I was such a simpleton.

We stayed in the neighbourhood of Tashkent for many days, until indeed a messenger came to Abdul. The news which the man brought, whatever it was, caused Abdul to snort and chuckle with great glee, and he gave orders for preparations to be made for moving.

We marched south-east, as Abdul indicated we would, keeping well to the right of the road to Hodjerd. This was in the general direction of Kokan, and was sufficient to satisfy any of the Red agents who might have been put at his heels.

For the most part the trail took us through an arid waste with here and there a more fertile belt. In the latter the Reds were busy among the peasants breaking the ground for the great collective farms which were to follow with the years.

All such areas Abdul skirted with care, and much of our march was done on brackish water and on the minimum of provisions.

Some of the men complained with the utmost

bitterness of the privations of the march, pointing out that much of it was unnecessary, but Abdul invariably lifted his whip to the grumblers, and carried on unruffled.

The man had a way with him, and when he set his mind on a certain course, nothing could deflect him.

We had continually to keep watch for marauding brigands, who were not to know, that there was nothing in our caravan worth carrying off except the camels. On several occasions we sighted suspicious bands when Abdul would let off a few rounds to let them know that we were armed. If they were bandits they took the hint and disappeared. If they were inoffensive peasants, they doubtless made off and hid.

We proceeded south to the vicinity of Hodjerd, and then struck west. We continued until we came to a large village near Djimbay, where Abdul again called a halt.

Indeed, a halt was necessary, for again some of the camels were in a bad way, and some of the men were far from fit because of the brackish water they had been compelled to drink.

I have noticed that camel men will drink water in all stages of dirtiness, and smack their lips with relish, but there is something about brinish water which attacks their insides, and causes them acute agony.

Abdul soon made known his purpose here. He declared that he was determined to rest there until a decent caravan arrived. It was then his intention

to await the unloading of the camels, secure as many as he wanted, together with rations, and to make off with all speed to Kitab to the southward where, he said he had business to transact which would require a goodly string of camels.

It was a fortnight before providence played into his hands. A caravan of roughly fifty camels came to the village, and the animals were in good fettle. They looked as if they had marched but a relatively short distance. Indeed, we learned later, that they had come no farther than Samarkhand.

Abdul made friends with the caravan men, and to his delight discovered that they did not frown upon his views of hospitality.

From some hidden store he procured bottles of spirit, and the men of the two camps fraternised in what at first sight appeared to be a disgusting carousal. Abdul, however, had threatened those of his men who did not disdain spirits the severest punishments of the whip if they did more than sip. He explained that when he gave the order to rise, they must be able to do so without being the least fuddled. Whether the fear of the whip kept them sober, or whether nature had provided them with heads which were impervious to drink, I know not, but the fact remains that when the visiting camel men were *hors de combat*, Abdul's men were still fresh and able to stand on their legs.

Leaving two or three of his men to continue the libations with any who should momentarily recover, Abdul led the way to the camels where the herders left in charge were easily overpowered. The camels

were hitched together, nose to tail, in three strings, and we were away.

It was all done so simply, and with the minimum of fuss.

Abdul deserved to succeed in his enterprises because of his disarming effrontery. We made all haste to Kitab, and were not even followed. Of course, the unfortunate camel owners had nothing beyond their feet on which to maintain a chase, and once the first few miles had been traversed we were comparatively safe from all fear of reprisals.

It was quite an imposing caravan which eventually encamped at Kitab, and still I wondered what was in Abdul's mind, because his accession of camel strength had weakened his man power. More of us were required to look after the captured camels, and Abdul had made no effort to recruit extra men.

At Kitab, however, all suddenly became clear.

Abdul was setting up as a regular caravan master, and his freight was not to be goods, but humans.

There were many in the vicinity who because of the manner in which Great Britain threatened to treat Turkey had shaken the dust of India from their shoes. They had pressed on through Afghanistan where at first they had been received with open arms. As the first batches of pilgrims proved to be but the vanguard of a veritable army, the Afghan authorities took alarm, owing to the impossibility of providing land for the immigrants and, in many cases, even food.

The gates of Afghanistan were shut against the horde, and those within the gates were invited either to return to India, or to proceed further. Quite a number selected the latter course, and found themselves bewildered, and almost penniless in the strange country beyond Bokhara.

There was such a community at Kitab, and to these people Abdul appeared as an angel from heaven.

He told them, with much flowery language, that he would transport them to the Turkey in whose support they had given up so much, and, being no Shylock, would require of them no more than they had!

Notwithstanding his remarkable display of charity, I could but notice that those whom Abdul selected to accompany him on his venture were those who could pay for the privilege.

There were several days of hectic preparation while the party procured meal and other things required for the journey, and we set off, a motley throng indeed, several persons to a camel.

The parting between those bound for the distant land and those who were left behind was most affecting.

It severed more than one romance.

There was one girl amongst those who remained who had an affection for a young stalwart who was of our company. The respective parents had not approved of a match, and as our caravan moved off the youth sang:

“Your face is like the moon;
Your eyes are like deep pools
In which I drown.
Your mouth is a pomegranate
From the Tree of Life.”

To which the girl replied with convulsive sobs and wild shrieks as we moved slowly on our way.

CHAPTER XVI

A CHILD IS BORN

THERE were now a number of women in the caravan on a status vastly dissimilar to that of Umid and the slave creatures, and there was acrimony right from the first order to march.

I have often wondered why women cannot live together in peace and harmony. Men will fight and slay, and perhaps sulk for a while, but women never seem to forgive the smallest grudge, and under a smiling exterior store up hate and venom, and exude this on the slightest pretext. Where men will fight and get the migraine out of their system, women will sit and simmer, until the poison gets to their heads and they become hysterical and do more damage with their tongues than a hundred men could do with knives.

Before Abdul's extraordinary decision to conduct a caravan of pilgrims right across Central Asia, Umid had been queen of all she surveyed. She had only to say a word to Abdul, and the person who had fallen into her bad graces spent an uncomfortable time thereafter. The consequence was that we were all vastly afraid of her, and her slightest wish was law.

We had a healthy respect both for her power with Abdul, and the biting rasp of her tongue.

When was added to this the realisation that she had all the wiles of woman at her finger-ends—wiles which she was not backward in bringing into play—one can see that her position was impregnable.

As I have said on more than one occasion, she was one to be avoided.

With the advent of the ladies of the pilgrims, there came about a subtle change. These people might not have paid heavily for the privilege of transportation, but—they *had* paid, and in a sense they were masters and we of the caravan their servants.

For his part Abdul never allowed this to worry him for one moment. He went his own imperturbable way, and if any of the male pilgrims crossed him he had one invariable sally.

He would say: "Here is the money you paid. Get off my camel, and walk!"

As Abdul was the only one who could say with any degree of certainty where we were and as jet-tisoning by the wayside would be tantamount to death, Abdul had little to worry him. There was no come-back to his simply expressed ultimatum, and the pilgrims, if they took umbrage, had just to grin and bear it.

If the men, however, failed to impress Abdul, and speedily gave up the attempt, this was not so with the women.

Some of them were terrors, and were the bane of my life.

And, they took a fiendish delight in taking it out of Umid.

Umid, I must confess, asked for it.

When we first took over the pilgrims she was as gushing and as arrogant as an empress, but as we proceeded on our way and she had the comforts and delights of Abdul's tent and the pilgrims had to make shift with what shelter could be improvised in the small time available at each halt, she became autocratic and spurned the women as if they were so much dirt.

Hot words were bound to come of such an attitude, and Umid must have been a brave woman to take on a crowd of harridans *en bloc*.

Umid was about fifty, and was past child-bearing, but she did her utmost to hide the fact, and indeed went to extreme pains to conceal her real age from the women. Not, of course, that they were taken in for one moment.

It was this foible of hers that led to the first of many violent scenes, and to an undercurrent of suspicion and intrigue which threatened to split the caravan.

One night Umid was extremely ill, and Abdul sought out several of the pilgrim women to console and comfort her. According to what I heard, they did so to some purpose, for there is little in camp life that is secret if there is the will for knowledge.

I could hear Umid groaning from her tent as I sat over my fire making my evening meal, and when Umid groaned a large tract of country was apprised of the fact.

I saw several of the women making for the tent, and by their pleased expressions, and their subdued

giggling, I guessed that it would be more than solace that Umid would receive.

According to one of the slave girls who was present, the little scene was enacted something like this:

With the entry of the women, Umid stopped her groaning, and, drawing herself up, announced in dramatic fashion that she was about to die.

Those who were to dispense solace and comfort restrained the wild whoops of joy which this information induced, and expressed their sorrow.

"How," asked one named Moti, "did this affliction come upon you?"

Umid pulled a wry face, and sideslipped the question. Her eyes filled with tremendous tears, and she sobbed broken-heartedly.

"It is so sad to die," she wailed. "It is so sad to leave Abdul. He is a good and vigorous husband, and for one so young, and for one who loves life——"

"Terrible," groaned the females in unison.

"Have you any pain?" Moti asked solicitously.

Judging by Umid's earlier groans the question was a tactless one. Perhaps it was meant to be so, for Umid rose majestically in her anger, only to sink to the ground again.

"She is in obvious pain," said Moti.

"She is in pain," chorused the other females, with more than inward satisfaction.

"Where is the affliction?" There was a beguiling tenderness in Moti's tones which should have warned an old campaigner like Umid.

"Here . . . here," she cried piteously, and rubbed her not inconsiderable paunch.

Moti, the unromantic, was inclined to scoff.

"Ah," she sniffed, "a stomach-ache. A herb potion will soon remove the pain."

Umid threw her a glance of malignant hatred.

"I am dying," she declared with feeble insistence, "and you come here and tell me that I have a childish stomach-ache!"

"No," said Moti consolingly. "Perhaps it is not the stomach-ache. I understand these things come upon one with age."

"Age!" Momentarily Umid forgot her aches, and rounded on her persecutor. "Age! . . . Have you come here to insult me?"

Another of the women poured oil on the troubled waters by patting her on the shoulder and making indefinable clucking noises. She leaned over Umid's quaking form, and whispered admonishingly to Moti. The latter's eyes sparkled, and she took up the cue so subtly conveyed.

"Let me feel," she said, with a return to feminine sweetness, and Umid, shutting her eyes for the ordeal, allowed Moti to prod.

"Ouch!" she bellowed, as Moti thrust spitefully with her finger.

"Did that hurt?"

Tears of anguish and hurt pride streamed down Umid's face.

"Hurt!"

"I did not feel anything wrong!" Moti thrust in her finger again.

"Oo-er," groaned Umid.

"There is it?"

Umid shuddered, but tearfully acquiesced.

Moti drew herself up, and made for the opening of the tent. She shrugged her shoulders with disdain, and was very much the piqued female.

Umid watched her depart, then called, quite loudly for a sick woman.

"Moti . . . Moti . . . do not leave me."

The woman halted in her tracks, and sniffed.

"Fancy making so much fuss about a little thing like that . . . it isn't womanly!"

"But, I am in pain—pain," yelled Umid.

Moti stalked back into the tent, and patted her enemy on the head.

"Don't worry," she said unctuously, "it will get much worse!"

"Worse! But why should it?" Umid held out her fat arms imploringly, beseeching sympathy and knowledge.

Moti looked coy, and a little shocked.

"You should know," she retorted severely.

"Know! How should I know?"

"A woman of your age . . .!" Moti's scorn was biting. "You ask me how you should know. You must blame Abdul."

"Abdul. What has Abdul to do with this. . . . You must be mad, Moti."

"Oh, if it wasn't Abdul . . . !" Moti was arch, and she walked from the tent as the full import of her suggestion broke upon the bewildered Umid.

Umid forgot her pain, and scrambled to her feet. She rushed after the offending Moti, shrieking the wildest imprecations.

The caravan gathered round, and Abdul came running up to seek the cause of the disturbance.

"This woman," shrieked Umid to Abdul, "calls me a loose woman."

Abdul flushed darkly, and glowered at Moti taking refuge on the edge of the throng.

"I did not," she retorted with spirit.

"She did."

"She is to have a child, and she says it was not Abdul!"

"You lying daughter of a pig-headed cow."

"Didn't she?" Moti appealed to the other women who had followed Umid in her dash.

"She did," they replied with malicious gusto.

Abdul's face was a picture not easily to be forgotten. Rage and perplexity chased each other in quick succession across his countenance, and he glared first at his wife and then at the sniggering females.

Umid, for once, was rendered beyond words. She shook as with an ague so strong was her emotion, and her vocal efforts were limited to a string of stifled "Oh's."

Suddenly, she leaped into life and took a flying leap at her tormentor, but Abdul's hand descended upon her while she was in mid-air, and despite her bulk, she was dragged incontinently to his tent.

Judging by the wails and the weeping which emanated from Abdul's abode, he was acting the part of outraged husband with the aid of a whip.

Umid was not seen in company for several days. When we marched she sat huddled upon her camel and would exchange words with none.

But, war had been declared among the women, and Abdul was looking none too happy.

Without doubt he now realised that he had been made to look a fool, and with Umid he was in good company.

He glowered and snarled, and was a difficult man to approach.

As for Umid, I knew that she was only biding her time.

Had she but known, she could have afforded to sit back and smile even then, but she did not know. Abdul was not one to prattle of his plans even to his wife, and her knowledge of coming events was on a par with that of the rest of us. It was precious little.

Moti was a pretty woman, with perfect teeth and a charming smile. She had a number of gold bangles, and any amount of sex appeal. She had only recently been married, but this did not prevent her flaunting either her bangles or her appeal. She knew that she was a beauty, and this knowledge was power.

Many times I saw Umid glowering at her, and biting her lips, and in the knowledge of what had gone before I believed that before the pilgrims left the caravan Moti would have cause to regret her saucy ways.

In this Abdul was to prove an ally, but Umid did not know it then. Had Abdul opened his mouth, I am certain that Umid could not have kept hers



MINDING THE BABY IN TURKESTAN
Note too, their national beverage of green tea

closed. Her sense of exultation would have been too much for her.

We crossed the Oxus and entered the country of the Turkomans. Here we had to proceed with the utmost caution, for we heard that bandits were everywhere.

This, however, did not stop the constant fighting among the women—fighting which was only truly consummated by success when the men had been finally driven to take sides.

I had to admire the cruelty and the cleverness with which the women occasioned these continual disputes. As an example I can perhaps quote the instance of the child that was born at the Sarab Well.

One of the women had been far gone in pregnancy when we commenced our long trek, but her loose garments had allowed her to screen the fact. Not, of course, that a matter of pregnancy would have deterred her from making the journey across Central Asia upon a jolting camel. The giving of children comes easily and naturally to such women, and they scorn the expensive professional attentions which their Western sisters demand in similar circumstances.

I have seen women working in the fields, carrying loads of forty to eighty pounds. Without a word to anyone, they would absent themselves for an hour, and during this time a child would be born, and the mother would be prepared to continue with her tasks.

I do not say that this is right, or requisite. It is

very natural, and the easy labours which come to the vast majority of Eastern women lend themselves to this fatalistic regard for child-bearing. There is nothing cramping or unnatural in their clothing, or in their occupations, and if children should come easily to any, it should come to them. There are, however, many occasions when something goes amiss, and then these women suffer the most terrible agonies which result more often than not, in their death.

Until very recently it was the custom to regard any such unfortunate creature *in extremis* as afflicted by a devil, and the most ghastly practices were invoked in order to exorcise the spirit. Now, in countries such as India, Persia and Turkey, the women are beginning to understand something of mothercraft, and trained midwives are admitted to the homes instead of being turned contemptuously away.

The birth by the Sarab Well was one of these very natural affairs. The mother made no sign indicative of the imminence of the event, and none except her husband, who was down with a delirious fever, was probably aware of the woman's condition.

When we halted, she walked away for seclusion, and in a short time returned with the infant in her arms, detected by none except the men on herding duty.

She placed her child on a bed of camel fodder, and went to attend her husband. There the child was found by another of the women.

Having a grudge against another who had been married but shortly before she joined the caravan, she took the child by stealth, and placed it against the belongings of the newly wed, then being unloaded from a camel.

She gazed at the child, expressing her surprise and delight, and when the young married woman appeared, she congratulated her fulsomely on the birth of a son.

The young woman, but three months wed, did not know how to overcome her embarrassment, especially as a crowd soon gathered, and gazed upon her, the women with scorn, and the men with amused indifference.

Suddenly, she turned and fled, and a great shout of raucous laughter went up—laughter which brought her husband to the scene, and to a spate of bantering congratulation and innuendo.

The husband, for once, was not so tongue-tied, and he cried his opinion of women to the heavens with an impassioned vehemence.

“Wanton—slayer of my good name,” he yelled in fury, and the crowd made sympathetic noises and egged him on.

The she-cat responsible for the turmoil, added fuel to the flames.

“A robust son,” she tittered. “How proud must be the happy father.”

“Father! . . . I am not the brat’s father. . . . This spawn of hell came to me as a virgin, and I have been fooled.”

He struck a fierce attitude, and addressed the crowd.

"How can I be the father?" he demanded, slobbering at the lips in his excitement.

"Ah!" went up the delighted chorus, and sundry forward females made audible remarks respecting his physique.

This made the man mad, and he hopped about like a frog, swearing to the heavens that he would be avenged, and that he would wash out the stain of his name in blood.

His wife, not to be outdone, took up the plaint, and assailed her traducer with words which would have seared the enamel off a kettle, and the other virago replied in kind.

Temporarily dazed by this avalanche of invective, the outraged husband made grabs for his knife, and his frenzied fingers eventually performing their purpose, he rushed upon his spouse, with the blade flashing.

She saw him coming in time, and dodged as he made a pass at her nose, but the point of the blade caught in the lobe of her ear, and severed it. She bled profusely, and sank down upon her haunches, sobbing convulsively.

The dazed husband looked at the blood, and then at his knife, one to the other, alternately, as if refusing to believe that he had done this thing; then he, too, broke down into a profound weeping.

The whole encampment was now in an uproar, but the sorry farce had yet to be played to its end.

Umid appeared on the scene, and surveyed the crowd like a contemplative elephant. Her massive

arms were held akimbo, and when her voice boomed out all had to take notice.

"Where is this child that has been but three months in the womb?" she demanded, with a complete lack of delicacy, and someone pointed to the infant on its back, oblivious of the trouble which its unheralded advent was causing.

"That is a full time boy," she cried pontifically, and poured her vituperation, not upon the "mother," but upon the hapless husband, still too stupefied by the rapid turn of events fully to appreciate his position.

"You spineless one with the knife," she roared. "You who are sick at the sight of a little blood. You should be pleased that your wife has accommodated you, and rendered you a service which is beyond your powers."

The man gaped at Umid, and opened his mouth, but no words came.

"You take a knife to the woman, and you even bungle that. Instead of her nose, you sever her ear."

As she thundered there was yet another interruption, and the recently delivered mother dashed imperiously into the centre of the fray.

"You say that you are the father of my child?"

She shrieked the words in a wild falsetto, and advanced ominously upon the man with the knife. He gave her a frightened glance, and sought to explain, but words were beyond him.

Disdaining the weapon in his hand, she rushed at him, and clawed her nails down his face.

"Would you rob me of my good name before all these people? Have you no shame, and—before your own wife?"

She clawed at him again, and long pieces of skin adhered to her fingers.

"Not only would you rob me of my name, but of my child also—you something one who could beget nothing bigger than a spider."

As she spoke her husband appeared, wild-eyed and shivering from his fever.

"You say that you have slept with my wife," he croaked. "Yes?"

Without waiting for an answer, he lunged forward. A knife flashed, and the man went down with several inches of steel in his throat.

Before an hour had gone the newly-married woman was a widow.

The camel herders told of the abduction of the new born, but little was said to the woman responsible. The incident only served to increase the hate among the womenfolk, and to render the men the more uncomfortable.

After this sanguinary scene Abdul spoke to the assembled men and advised them to keep the women as far apart as possible, but the women, already assembling on the fringe of the crowd, jeered, and broke in with remarks of an intensely personal nature.

I saw Abdul gulp, and clutch at the whip he was carrying. He glared at the brazen hussies as if he could willingly skin the hides off the lot.

Then, for some unaccountable reason, he broke into loud laughter.

He leered at the ladies, and scowled upon their menfolk.

"Wag your tongues, ladies," he cried out in real good humour. "Have your little jokes. I would have you all happy and devoid of worry. Nothing displeases Pappa Abdul more than ladies with haggard cheeks. Laugh, you hussies, and make fun of Abdul. Laughter keeps the ladies young."

He gazed at the creatures with lascivious eyes, and bright, provocative ones returned his stares.

The men growled, and shifted uneasily, and turned upon their women. With rough handling, they sent them to their cooking fires, the women giggling and protesting, and Abdul roaring with laughter.

He turned at length, and gazed into the beetling eyes of Umid who had silently taken up a stance behind him.

"Abdul has a way with women," he remarked facetiously.

Umid spat.

CHAPTER XVII

TO THE SHORES OF THE GULF

DURING our trek across the desert, I found the isolated Turkoman communities we came across quite pleasant, if somewhat gauche. Abdul, on the other hand, was wont to gibber with impotent rage whenever a Turkoman came near.

We had encamped one night near a small collection of Turkoman tents, and I had bought some rice of the tribesmen. The price I had to pay was high, but they explained that they could only obtain it from Astrabad, and as they were in bad odour there, it had to be procured by stealth.

As I have said, I found them quite pleasant people. Perhaps this was because I possessed nothing which was worth stealing. With Abdul it was slightly different.

He had a rug on which he set great store. From my knowledge of rugs it was not a particularly valuable one, but for some reason or another Abdul had an affection for it. Frequently, when he slept away from his tent to escape the everlasting upbraiding of Umid, he used it as a bed.

On the night I have in mind he went to sleep quite peacefully. At dawn, I heard him yelling for me, and there was terrible anger in his voice.

When I reached him he was almost incoherent with rage.

"I lay upon my rug all night," he gasped, "and because of the midges I hardly slept a wink. Yet, in the few moments when I closed my eyes, they had my rug."

"They" had, for Abdul was lying upon the bare earth.

Near to his side was a chicken's feather, and the whole matter was explained.

The thief had waited until Abdul had slept, and had tickled him until he rolled over. Folding the exposed portion of the rug, the culprit had tickled Abdul on the other side until the consequent rolling left the remainder of the rug clear. It was an old trick, and Abdul should have known better.

Abdul was giving himself up to vain vituperation.

"They would rob their own mothers," he growled, shaking with fury. "May their graves be defiled; may their——" But speech was too much for him.

It was quite evident, however, that one had to be more than ordinarily cautious in one's relations with these desert dwellers, for they had some remarkable codes. While believing in the benefits of slavery, they had their own views on who could be sold into captivity.

At another encampment of Turkomans we found a scene of considerable excitement. At first sight I believed the day to be one of some great festivity, as indeed it was, but not exactly of the order I had in mind.

Apparently one of the tribe had an aged uncle who was rather a nuisance, and he conceived the idea of selling him to a neighbouring tribe with which his own was at variance. He used a native of Astrabad as a go-between, and the sale was negotiated for a ridiculously small sum.

However, the plot had been discovered, and both the nephew and the man from Astrabad had been seized.

When we arrived, the Turkomans were on the point of celebrating a Roman holiday.

The man from Astrabad was about to be killed, and the graceless nephew had been condemned to eat part of his carcass.

I personally did not remain to take part in the festivities.

The Turkomans live in circular tents with domed shaped tops, and they were a cheery lot of vagabonds, but not, I firmly believe, the great fighters they are made out to be.

Their women had, to my mind, most unbecoming head-dresses. I never had the opportunity of examining one at close quarters, but they resembled a round chocolate box. They were decorated in front with rows of coins and behind with a length of material which hung down their backs.

The women were allowed a great amount of latitude, and did not entirely conceal their faces. I was told that it was considered indelicate to expose the mouth and throat. Invariably, these were covered with a white bandage.

The tents themselves were formed of a species of

trellis work which could be folded up when the tribesmen were on the march, or on the rampage. The trellis work was covered with thick felt numdahs. In the centre of each tent was a hole in which burned a fire, around which were spread numdahs and rugs. The tribesmen knew how to make themselves comfortable.

This I put down to the place occupied by the women, who were treated with a consideration which surprised me, knowing what brutalities the tribesmen were capable of inflicting.

Most of the women I saw, besides the coins which adorned their head-dresses, had a variety of cornelian rings, and quite a number were attired in silk robes beneath which peeped blue, white and scarlet pyjamas.

Except when out on business the tribesmen occupy the same camping grounds, but they carry on quite a big trade with Khiva and Astrabad, nevertheless. For six months of the year most of the tribesmen are away from the encampments trading with skins, and to this fact I think we owed our immunity from attack.

A kind of pax descends upon the desert during this period, and it seems to be bad form either to attack caravans or neighbouring tribes. From what I heard, inter-tribal raiding for cattle is quite frequent, but I judged that these forays were never carried out unless the attackers could count on overwhelming numbers.

The Turkoman still clings to his curved sword, which he prefers in battle to modern firearms.

One peculiarity about the men always intrigued me, for I saw remarkably few with what one could call full beards.

The majority had rather scanty and irregular tufts adhering to their chins, and one thought instinctively of goats. The men seemed to be inordinately proud of these appendages, however, and considered themselves fortunate in the possession of so much hair. In that respect, at least, they were no he-men.

They have small patience with those of the tribe who attempt to defile married women.

At one encampment into which I strayed, an unfortunate had been detected in making advances to a lady whose husband was on long absence. She had been alone and forlorn for several months, and was likely to remain so for more, and until her husband returned from far off Khiva.

The hapless wight I saw trussed up had decided to improve on the occasion and to give the lady the solace of his presence. He had been detected when crawling beneath the numdahs of her tent, and had been hauled back by the heels by an enraged community.

Apparently, as far as justice was concerned, the lady did not enter into the bargain, on the assumption, I suppose, that if the man did not transgress the women would remain faithful.

Among such a people, where many of the males are absent for long periods, a sort of rough and ready justice is necessary if family life is to be maintained, and the man I saw awaiting his fate was

quite resigned. He fully appreciated the enormity of his offence, and he knew what was coming to him. It seemed that there could be no variation in sentence; nothing advanced in mitigation; nothing indeed, but swift and unpleasant death.

In such cases the Turkomans even dispense with the formality of a trial. They just tie up the culprit until the following morning in order to give him time to meditate on his sins.

No questions are asked of the woman, and it is unthinkable for the man to plead, as did Adam, that he was tempted.

Next morning I saw the remains of the philanderer, and the sight was not a pretty one.

The nose, ears, one hand, one foot, and the private parts had been removed. The victim had then been allowed to bleed to death.

As we moved nearer to the Persian border, the Turkomans began to display more signs of contact with authority, but this did not save me from one unpleasant incident which began innocently enough.

We had arrived at a place where there was water, and about three miles off trees were to be discerned. We were short of wood, and Abdul directed me to take a camel and a couple of men, and procure material for our fires.

We had collected quite a store, and were returning to camp, when we were assailed by a crowd of excited tribesmen. At first I could make nothing of their chatter, but that they were angry and more than a little aggressive was painfully obvious.

It turned out that we had committed sacrilege.

The trees marked the place where an Imam had performed some miraculous feat, and it was firmly in the minds of the tribesmen that if a man broke branches from the trees he would shortly break his own sacrilegious arm.

Apparently the tribesmen were angry, not so much because we had taken the wood, but because retribution had not yet overtaken us.

Their attitude seemed to indicate that they were prepared to act as the instrument of vengeance at any moment.

One swashbuckler was particularly unpleasant, and would persist in thrusting his nose well into my face, while he gesticulated wildly. I requested him to keep his distance, and when he ignored me, I pushed him from me.

Immediately there was a renewed outcry from the tribesmen, and one or two curved swords appeared from ornate scabbards. The moment was an unpleasant one, for though I had a sword, I have never pretended to be more than a hacker and a thruster, and these men were swordsmen from birth.

Out of the corner of my eye, however, I saw camels being urged to their feet. Away in the distance, the sharp eyes of Abdul had seen something amiss, and whatever else he was, he was never a coward.

I knew that parleying with these men would only be construed as an earnest desire to avoid fight, so I, too, drew my sword, and hoped for the best.

My previous views about the Turkomans were

put severely to the test, but fortunately I was right, because in a rough and tumble encounter such as threatened to develop, my companions and I would have had no chance.

Fortunately, a verbal battle seemed to be the customary prelude to blood-letting, and before this was ended, Abdul appeared, followed by some of the more redoubtable of our men, and the situation was saved.

Abdul just sat on his camel with his pistol in his hand, and looked cynical. He had no wish to antagonise the tribesmen, and when he heard their story, he invited them to a meal.

The wood followed, and the food which these enthusiasts ate was actually cooked over the wood which they had held to be sacred. They must have known of this, but I suppose they considered themselves absolved as they were not actively concerned in gathering it.

Over their food, the men again expressed their belief in the retribution which would follow a visit to the trees, and they eyed me curiously.

Under pressure, however, they had to agree that Fate did not invariably demand the breaking of an arm.

They recounted a fairly recent story of a man who had gathered wood there, and had laden it on two camels. He had departed, and later his camels were seen wandering, with the wood still tied to their backs.

The man was eventually found dead, having been bitten by a snake.

I could well believe this latter story, as the country abounded in poisonous reptiles, the presence of which was most unpleasant. Whenever we walked, we made it a practice to carry stout canes. I broke the backs of some six or seven such snakes which crossed my path. At night, when we slept, it was necessary to maintain a fire, for a snake will not face a light or a flame. It was because of our expenditure of wood for this purpose that our supplies had been so depleted.

In point of fact we had to be increasingly careful as we began to get south of the Caspian, for the whole country was riddled with superstition and legend, and it was possible, by the most innocent of acts, to bring a swarm of hornets about our ears.

We learned, for instance, to be particularly chary of rocks which had any peculiarities in formation. One such outcrop, against which we encamped, was supposed to mark the spot where Satan alighted when he fell from Heaven. This was taken as the reason why the local inhabitants were steeped in every form of vice. The people were undoubtedly vicious, but Satan is reputed to have bounced in so many places when he was unceremoniously ushered out of Heaven.

The whole countryside, too, reeks with legend about the venerable Noah, and his two sons, Sin and Lam.

There was one place which was conspicuous for a large outcrop of stone. Many of the rocks were curiously formed.

I was gravely assured that the stones marked the

spot where Noah and his two sons went to earth when they were chased by men from the surrounding district. Noah and his sons, who had had a dispute about water rights—the most ancient form of feud in the world—had to gallop for their lives. Their pursuers were hot on their heels, and they asked the local inhabitants for information regarding the fugitives.

The story has a certain affinity with that of Lot's wife, for the locals believe that these men, while refraining from giving the required information in words, treacherously marked the flight of the prophets by turning their heads over their right shoulders in which position they became fixed. This, the peasantry naïvely explained, was the reason why they all had a slight twist in their necks and long and projecting chins. It is remarkable, but the majority of them certainly had.

However, apprised of the route taken by Noah and his sons, the pursuers pushed on. Almost, they overtook them, but on the spot now marked by the stones, the earth opened and closed over them. Marking the spot with a pile of rock, the tired hunters slept for the night, with the intention of digging out their quarry in the morning, but their astonishment was great with the dawn, for instead of one pile of stones the whole countryside was littered with boulders as it is to be seen to-day.

The long-chinned ones could tell stories of the recent past, as well as of remote antiquity.

One concerning a Vazir of the last century was typical of their sense of humour.

The Vazir was an industrious man, and had caused many villages to be built. Riding out from Teheran to inspect the work of cutting canals which would feed the villages with water, he was accosted by a donkey driver from Ispahan. The man complained that he had been long at his work, but had so far received no wages.

He threw himself in the way of the great one, crying:

"Ah, Aga. My donkey and I are starving. We both work hard. Aga, do not allow us to be thus treated."

The Vazir, who had ridden far, and was fatigued, had small time for a donkey man.

"Dog of an Ispahani," he cried. "Go and die. What more can an Ispahani expect!"

The unfortunate donkey man was seized, and tumbled off his beast. He rolled in the dust, but, not to be outdone, he scrambled to his feet and ran after the great one.

"Aga, Aga," he wailed, "listen to me, Your Eminence. It is true that I am an Ispahani, and fit only to die. For that I am well content. But my donkey—he comes from Teheran—must he die too?"

The Vazir was a native of Teheran, and the witticism appealed to him. Not only was the donkey man paid his wages, but he received great advancement.

As we made our slow way through Persia we were frequently stopped by patrols, but when it was learned that we were a party of pilgrims, we were

invariably allowed to proceed, and sometimes the utmost assistance was rendered us.

The people themselves showed us of the utmost courtesy, and quite often refused to take payment for wood and food.

Some of the women in the caravan invested in some of the highly-coloured Persian silks, and paraded themselves like peacocks—or should it be peahens? Whatever the gender, they succeeded in riling each other, so I suppose they considered the money well spent.

Some of the party were affected at this time with the bite of a particularly vicious form of bug which seemed to infest the ground. It was a very nasty insect, and much more voracious than the horrible specimens which can make life so miserable in such places as Poona or Malta.

Those who were bitten lay for days on their camels or on their rugs in a state of utter drowsiness, but they told me afterwards that they did not experience any pain.

Locals to whom I mentioned the matter shrugged their shoulders philosophically, and assured me quite cheerfully that it was not unusual for the person bitten to die. None of our victims succumbed, and I was fortunate in escaping the attentions of these vile creatures.

I was glad, because the locals told me that the only real antidote was to wrap one's naked body in the raw hide of a newly slaughtered cow!

There was little of incident in most of our journey. It was mostly hard marching and monotony, with

Abdul in supreme command, and as arbiter of direction. The whole caravan blindly followed his instructions as to the length and duration of marches, but I began to think that he was taking a curious route to Turkey when he veered more and more to the south.

I suppose I was the only one in our very curious party, with the one exception of Abdul, who had the faintest conception in which direction Turkey lay. The others were quite blithe, and their trust in Abdul was pathetic. Never once did they think even to question him. Their point of view was that he was the caravan master. It was his job to know the way. He had contracted to take them to their destination, and all they had to do was to wait in patience. Of the latter commodity, they had plenty. Westerns, in a similar position, or in a similar environment, would have been asking questions all day long. These unfortunate people were completely fatalistic.

When we left Semnoon, and swung into the inhospitable salt desert south of there, I was bold enough to ask Abdul our route, and he replied light-heartedly enough that he was forging on to Shuraghien and Mushkinun, the former to the north-east of Ispahan and the latter directly east. This meant that we had completely abandoned our westward trend, and were now marching more or less directly south.

I was troubled by this, and asked, "What then?"

Abdul grinned, and showed his teeth. "Oh, we go on." He was quite nonchalant.

"But," I expostulated, "If we go on we must eventually come to the Persian Gulf."

"True," he replied, "and what more could my pilgrims require? Do they want me to march and march, and end up among the Kurds above Mosul? What do you think would happen to us there? Do you think the fact that we are pilgrims would stop them cutting our throats?"

This was a logical rejoinder, and one which it was difficult to counter, but though I accepted it—I could not do otherwise—I was far from satisfied in my mind. Knowing Abdul, I began to suspect that he had some dark scheme afoot, but except that he continued to march southward, he gave me no cause for suspicion.

In a sense he even went out of his way to disarm suspicion.

Drawing me aside at one of our halts, he spoke of his plans. He declared that he would be able to sell his camels at a good profit when we arrived at the coast. There he would either purchase or hire a native boutre which could be used for transporting the whole party up the Gulf where arrangements could be made for the pilgrims to negotiate the Tigris, their route from there to Turkey being a matter of small difficulty, as Turkish escorts were said to be keeping the roads beyond the Irak frontier.

If the pilgrims got as much as this out of Abdul I thought they would be lucky, but I held my peace. Abdul was not one with whom one could argue.

We carried on to Shiraz, and bore south-eastward to Derabgherd, and from there, via Forg and Tazri,

made our way to the shores of the Persian Gulf. We continued along the coast until we came to a small place named Chenaas—a foul, pestilential hole, the principal products of which appeared to be bubonic plague and a wide variety of fevers.

Here Abdul declared we would halt and recuperate while he made arrangements for a boutre. Altogether we were here for over a month, during which time I boiled every drop of water I drank, and kept open a vigilant eye for the fleas which I knew were the carriers of the plague.

Our party was fortunate. A number went down with intermittent fevers, but the fleas kept their distance. I suppose we had all been so hardened by our long trek that the sores and boils, of which the locals had an extraordinarily ripe crop, provided a more succulent feeding ground.

CHAPTER XVIII

ABDUL MAKES A SALE

DURING our stay at Chenaas, Abdul departed on several excursions.

Umid, I noticed, was growing exceedingly good tempered. Every time Abdul went away she smiled. Indeed, she spent most of her time smiling.

This, however, did not prevent her taking it out of the other women, and especially Moti, who was her *bête noire*. These two would sling insults at each other across the encampment, and there was not one part of each others anatomy which was not unfavourably dissected. They hated each other did these two, and Moti was at a disadvantage because she was well-favoured and drew the glances of the men. Especially when her husband was near the unfortunate Moti was especially vulnerable.

Umid would taunt her on her gaiety, and often I thought that one or the other would be knifed before morning. Moti returned Umid's hate, because by some curious twist of feminine logic, she held her primarily responsible for the troubled state of the camp.

Often, she called Umid "murderer" and "assassin," and Umid would retort in the vilest rhetoric. Moti could be no woman, she taunted, as she had bedded months with a man and had failed to produce child.

Something curious was happening to Umid.

She would engage in these verbal duels, and would not always go to the trouble of exacting the last word. This in itself was extraordinary, for unless she had something on her mind no woman of Umid's calibre would allow another this privilege while she could still articulate. And, it was not for want of inspiration. Umid did not lack imagination, and her vituperative vocabulary would have rendered an old-style London cockney a purist in comparison.

And again, after a mud-slinging match, instead of retiring to her tent and chewing over the cud of venom, Umid would sing and chant, and occasionally give vent to a hoarse chortle.

It was uncanny, and unnatural, and it worried me.

After one of his wanderings, Abdul appeared with a ferocious looking savage who turned out to be a Danakhil from the Ethiopian-British Somaliland border. He was a vile creature with the habits of an animal—and a lowly animal at that. He had the most disgusting practices when eating, and I for one made a point of keeping beyond his range. If anything displeased his palate, he straight away spat it forth. When not expectorating half-masticated food, he was spitting out green saliva like a camel, for he habitually chewed a coarse kind of raw tobacco. When he was temporarily tired of the quid, he would remove the foul mess from his mouth, and perch it behind its ear for future reference.

According to Abdul, he was a charming man, who knew the ways of the Persian Gulf. He was destined to be our master mariner, he said, and to be the chief navigator of the boutre which he had hired.

A few days later, the small dhow-like vessel appeared off the coast. I was palled by its smallness, and some of the pilgrims declared that they would never trust themselves to its frailty.

Abdul came up smiling, and explained that the vessel was not the one which would take us up the Gulf. That, he said, was on the opposite shore, awaiting our arrival. We had, he went on, come to a difficult part of the coast to which a larger vessel could only put in under extreme difficulty.

He could not have been more ingratiating, and said that the ship over the horizon was a fine one, and that before our eyes was nothing more than a ferry.

The clamour died down with these words, and arrangements were made to split up the party, for it was obvious that all could not be transported in one voyage.

Assuring all that the trip across the Gulf was but of short duration in a boutre as speedy as the one lying in readiness, and that separation, if that was found to be necessary, would be but of small moment, he rounded up the pilgrims, and broke them into two parties.

I noticed that those who were segregated for the first trip were all men. All the women, and their menfolk, remained for the second transportation.

The party eventually embarked amidst much lamentation on the part of those who were left behind, and Abdul went with them.

Umid sang more loudly than ever, and went around with a constant smirk which did more to aggravate Moti than half a day's adroit and licentious badinage.

Abdul returned after an absence of five days, and he appeared well pleased with himself.

To the anxious queries of the pilgrims who remained with us he replied that the voyage across the Gulf had been without incident, and that all who had gone over and embarked upon his "fine ship" had experienced the benefits of the sea air, and were in splendid health. All, he assured them, were anxious for the remainder of the party to savour the delights of sea travel under his ægis and that of the Danakhil who, he was anxious to inform everyone, was a fine sailor, and a master of his craft.

Apparently, however, the voyage of the second party could not be immediately undertaken, as the boutre had sprung its mast. There would have to be an inevitable, if annoying, delay of several days while a new mast was procured.

The pilgrims accepted the news philosophically. After all, what were a few more days after so many?

That evening I asked Abdul about his trip, and he said that when about half way over they had been hailed by a British sloop. They had been compelled to heave-to, and the sloop had put out a boat. A British naval officer and an Indian bo'swain

had insisted on boarding the boutre, and according to Abdul, had been most suspicious.

At the behest of the officer, the bo'swain had closely cross-questioned the pilgrims, and it had taken a long time to satisfy him that they were on the vessel of their own free will. Faced with the unyielding statements of the men that they were on their way to Turkey, and desired to have nothing further to do with a Government which could countenance such unutterable wrongs on the Caliphate, he had at length departed.

Abdul seemed to be greatly amused by the incident, but even then I did not guess what was in his mind. It was not usual for Abdul to be so confiding or so high-spirited, and I should have known better.

That night there was a terrific wailing and shrieking in the camp. Hurriedly I made to grasp my sword, thinking that perhaps we had been attacked, but for some unaccountable reason it was missing.

Then I listened. Feminine voices were in the ascendancy, and though there was a deeper rumble of bass behind them, I concluded that another bitter strafe had broken out among the female element. As this could arise over the most trivial of incidents, such as the possession of a chicken, or the right to a pitcher, I shrugged my shoulders and went on with the task at hand.

These word battles could go on for hours, as I knew full well, and often the degree of noise and intensity was in inverse proportion to the issue. In the determined and resolute insistence upon the

last word, these women were remorseless, and they would think nothing of having the entire encampment by the ears for hours on end.

High falsetto shrieks cut through the night air, and I thought that some of the women were either engaged in battle—and they were ugly fighters when they got going—or were feeling the weight of their husbands' wrath for the length and unseemliness of the disturbance.

As an obligato to the shrieking, there was the rumble of the men—all very ordinary, and something which we had learned to expect. Gradually, however, it became apparent to me that there was a more sinister note behind this shrieking, and that the bass rumbling which accompanied it was heartier and more persistent than that which ordinarily goes with a husbandly admonition.

The shrieking was sustained, and it was maintained at that high pitch which denotes terror. There was real anger in the male voices, and there was a complete absence of those mercurial cadences which go with domestic strife. There were no sequences. There was no high treble ripping out a yard or so of invective. There was no answering rattle of fury, as the male half forced expletives through clenched teeth. The timbre was all wrong.

Reluctantly—for one does not become a party to these affairs if one can possibly avoid it—I rose to my feet, and sauntered away to make cautious investigations.

If this was really something built of feminine perversity, I was going to keep well to the shadows.

I had seen what had happened to those who had been too inquisitive, and too thrusting.

An amazing scene met my eyes as I made for Abdul's tent. The male pilgrims had been segregated from their women, and they lay bound on the ground. The finishing touches were being put to the lashes of two of the men as I arrived. They were strong, and well muscled, and they fought like furies, but they had no chance against Abdul's men who had years of practice in dealing with recalcitrant camels and in the lashing together of bales.

The fight must have been sanguinary while it lasted, for several of the pilgrims were covered with blood. I learned afterwards that the wounds were entirely superficial, but they looked terrible enough at that moment.

All the men, without exception, were roaring with rage. They poured down the most frightful curses upon the head of Abdul, who stood quietly by, grinning sardonically. He might have been watching the pounding of so many beasts rather than the binding of a number of humans.

I really believe he enjoyed the exhibition. He at least retained a wonderful good humour, and laughed immoderately when one of the struggling men wrenched free an arm and struck savagely at those who held him.

This man was a giant in stature, and four men were engaged in a hectic endeavour to render him harmless. For a moment he broke free as his attackers flinched under his hurricane of blows. He stood on

his feet, bellowing like a bull, and when a camel man rushed at him, he felled him like an ox.

I could hear Abdul chuckling with glee as the man went down under the terrific impact.

Abdul turned on the other three men who were somewhat lugubriously regarding their antagonist, and he whipped them with words of vitriol.

"Have I nautch girls for my camels?" he yelled. "I asked you to bind him, not shower him with endearments!"

This is a very rough paraphrase of what he said. The reality was too scorching and lecherous to produce *in extenso*.

The three camel men, stung by Abdul's playful searing of their manhood, went in again to the attack, and the stalwart was borne down, and effectively roped.

Away, on the farther side of Abdul's tent, the women were corralled. They were not bound, but half a dozen camel men kept them in a bunch under the menace of big camel whips. Without exception, all the women were shrieking, and the combined noise was truly blood-curdling.

Every now and again a camel man would give a twirl with his whip. The lash would tear hissing through the air, and the women would shriek even the more loudly, and huddle together for protection.

Overseering this macabre scene was Umid, and never have I seen a woman so completely full of the joy of life.

A nearby fire gave its flickering illumination, and Umid's eyes were large and round, and blazing with a triumph long concealed and now welling over in an ecstasy of bliss. They revealed the overpowering hate, the sense of desire, the ability to harm and withal, the right of mastery which was Umid's at that all-compelling moment. It was her hour. She was not only avenged for past insults, but she could probe and main, and singe and sear. It was the acme of sadistic rapture—resolute, unwavering, and determined.

Umid's eyes were a revelation, yet I am doubtful if she really saw.

At that moment she had not before her a huddled heap of frightened females, cowering back from the menacing whirling of the lash. Her great, luminous eyes saw in retrospect only those barbs which had left each feminine tongue. Metaphorically, she stood there, stripping herself, and removing, one by one with salacious ecstasy, each of those barbed shafts which had found a nesting place beneath her skin during the long days of verbal combat of the march across half Asia.

Umid was at once very feminine in her immensity, and very revolting. She was the very embodiment of that power which instinctively rejects mercy.

She took no heed of the whirling lashes. Indeed, I doubt if she was interested in corporal punishment. Her triumph could only have been lessened if these women had been done to death, for some women can show great fortitude in the presence of pain. Her triumph was purely mental, and it was the

greater because she knew that the other women knew.

Had she rushed in among them and assailed them, they would have welcomed the diversion. As it was, they shrank more from the triumphant light in the eyes of their mutual enemy than they did from the great camel hide thongs in the hands of the men.

It was a truly feminine moment, and one which I trust I will never see again.

An ugly suspicion began to cross my mind.

Abdul, tired of his pose as caravan master, was determined to jettison these unfortunates on the shores of the Gulf. The men, sensing something of this, had created a disturbance, and rough measures had proved to be necessary.

I was wrong.

Abdul had more in mind than this.

I drifted back to where the men pilgrims lay bound, and Abdul was going from one to the other, administering to each a hefty kick.

He demanded that all should cease their bellowing, and when they refused to desist, but continued to assail him with epithets, he summoned the Danakhil boatman.

The latter came running from the shore, and he produced rough implements which he heated in the fire.

Abdul addressed himself to the giant who had given his captors so much trouble, and the man spat in his face.

Abdul nodded to the Danakhil. The prostrate

man's garments were torn from him, there was a shriek of berserk rage, and a bellowing roar of agony, and an aroma of singeing.

A silence fell upon the bound men which was numbing in comparison with the previous hubbub.

We remained in our camp for several days during which time Abdul disposed of his camels. We were left with the *boutre*, a vessel of not more than seven tons, and the tender mercies of the Danakhil.

I wondered how our party could be accommodated on such a tiny vessel, but apparently few, if any, of the camel men were to accompany us. Abdul, it seemed, had had enough of caravaning for the time being, and he paid off his men.

With one or two notable exceptions, all the camel men disappeared. Those that remained kept a constant vigil on the pilgrims, who were kept bound throughout the period of waiting. The women were utterly confounded by the presence of Umid, who muttered unmentionable threats at the least sign of insubordination. The women were unable to do anything without the assistance of their men-folk, and I suppose Abdul refused to regard them as a danger.

The stern of the boat was decked, and the dark hole which this made was enclosed with mats. It was into this that the pilgrims were packed, the men still tightly bound. They were arrayed in rows like so many logs, and the women were pushed in on top of them to find what few square inches remained.

Three villainous-looking tribesmen assisted the Danakhil in manipulating the boat, which had an extraordinarily high mast, and a great mass of sail.

When we embarked it was dark, and there was a stiff breeze blowing in the direction of the opposite shore.

As soon as we weighed anchor, and got under weigh, the slight vessel, which seemed to have absolutely no ballast, keeled alarmingly. Two men skimmed up ropes, and looping them round their legs, remained there perched in the darkness, doing much by their weight to make up for the deficiency of ballast.

It was impossible to determine our speed in knots, but the breeze clipped us through the water at a great rate, and it was obvious that the voyage was to be a short one.

Abdul crouched at the foot of the mast, smoking a hookah, and no one would have guessed from his demeanour that he had shanghaied a number of pilgrims of his own faith, and was engaged in slave-running to the coast of Oran.

We went on, slipping through the water, the Danakhil at the tiller, and wondered what would be the end of this strange adventure. I had qualms respecting my own lot, for I well knew that Abdul was quite able, if the whim so took him, to include me amongst his human cargo. I kept as quiet as possible, and endeavoured to evade his eye.

We had been sailing for perhaps two and a half hours when the silence was broken by a sudden exclamation from the Danakhil. He still clutched

the tiller, and I felt the boutre fall away on a tack. I looked at him sagely, and I saw him glaring intently into the darkness.

At that moment I was blinded by a terrific white glare. It was so disconcerting that for some moments I was unable to collect my thoughts.

I could hear Abdul cursing, and a frightened twittering came from the hold where the pilgrims lay hidden.

A ship's siren sounded in the distance, and the light continued to play on us.

Abdul bade Umid stand up in the glare. He ordered me to the hold, with orders to browbeat any of the pilgrims who should make a sound.

The noise of oars against rowlocks could be heard coming over the water, and there was a hail. I was able to make out a boat rocking in the waves. In the stern stood an officer—a British naval officer.

Abdul strode to the side of the boutre, and answered the hail.

"You stopped me several nights ago," he shouted.

An indistinguishable roar was the only response.

Abdul called Umid to his side.

"See, Sahib," he called. "Do you not recognise me? I have my wife with me now, for my pilgrims have all been ferried across."

The rowing boat came rubbing against the side of the boutre, and an Indian bo'swain addressed Umid.

"Are you this man's wife?" He indicated Abdul.

"Surely!" Umid smiled back, as if she rather enjoyed the adventure. She did her part well.

The bo'swain extended his arms, and pulled himself up so that his head was level with the low gun-whale. He swung his head side to side, searching the decks, then dropped back, and spoke to the naval officer.

With a ringing, "Achha," the bo'swain fended off, and returned to the waiting sloop.

The searchlight swished off, and with no appearance of haste, we continued our voyage.

So nearly did Abdul fall into the hands of those whose task it is to prevent slaving and gun-running along the Persian Gulf ports.

Fate was kind to him that night, but he was tempting Providence too far.

The encounter seemed to go to Abdul's head. As soon as he had recovered from the fright which the incident had undoubtedly accorded him, he spat out a guttural oath; then laughed immoderately. It was the laugh of one who had thrown a dice with fate, and had won. It went further than that. It indicated that the dice was loaded in the thrower's favour, and that further gambits could be contemplated with abandon.

I did not accompany Abdul ashore on the coast, being roughly bidden to remain behind. I do not know how the sale of the pilgrims was consummated, or who was their purchaser.

All I heard was a loud wailing as, several hours after their disembarkation, the pilgrims, roped together two by two, set out for the interior. There were men with them on horses.

The wailing was continual. Gradually, it grew

fainter and fainter, and finally ceased. The wind was blowing on the unfortunates' backs.

Abdul came aboard, and squatted by the mast. Umid flopped down beside him.

He opened a dirty, red silk handkerchief, and allowed Umid to gaze. I too saw. There were three fairly large stones, two spherical, and the other irregular.

They were pearls, the price of souls.

CHAPTER XIX

NEMESIS

HIS work with the pilgrims completed, Abdul lost no time in cleaving the waters of the Gulf for the lesser dangers of the Arabian Ocean. We skirted the coast of Oman and Hadramaut, and sought the refuge of the Red Sea.

Abdul spent many hours at the mast foot in earnest conclave with the Danakhil. I overheard little, for they spoke softly, but I did gather that we were bound for Jhibhuti.

Abdul was nothing if not versatile, and visions of gun-running passed through my mind, because there existed plenty of markets along the African coasts for weapons of cheap Continental manufacture.

There had, only a short time previously, been the threat of trouble in British Somaliland, and I thought it not improbable that Abdul might attempt to do business with some of the disaffected tribesmen of that area. The thought made me exceedingly uncomfortable.

The possibility of gun-running, even under the eyes of vigilant British war vessels, was not so absurd as it might seem at first sight, for, providing one was prepared to grease palms, much of the actual work in connection with the trade could be done quite openly. Obviously, the most difficult part

of such an enterprise is the carrying of the arms to the Red Sea, but I speedily learned enough of the traffic to realise that if Abdul intended to take gun-running into his purview, his would be the part where lay the sticky end.

Jhibhuti, a free port for Abyssinia, could import arms from the Continent and elsewhere without anyone being in a position to question the consignments. It was what happened to the arms after they had been landed at Jhibhuti that gave the Powers such headaches.

It was the custom to smuggle them away in small vessels. Always were the arms well greased—they were plunged into boiling fat so as to render them waterproof both inside and out—and they were secreted in water skins and the like. The small dhows hugged the coasts, the crews fishing the while. If danger threatened, the fishermen went ashore, and buried their cargo until they were free to sail once more.

It soon became evident, however, that Abdul was not interested in guns, but in pearls, and our visit to Jhibhuti was for no other purpose than to pick up a couple of pearl divers whom the Danakhil declared were masters of their trade.

In addition to the divers, Abdul acquired a servicable pirogue, a small boat from which the divers work, and we worked our way along the coast toward Assab.

Near an island here, Abdul set up as a pearl fisher—not that he ever entered the water, or touched an oyster until it had been opened.

Our two divers, notwithstanding the value of

the pearls they must have retrieved from the depths during the course of their career, were miserably poor, and possessed nothing more than the cloth round their loins when Abdul took them over.

The Danakhil explained to me that the men who take up the work of diving are of very low intelligence, and allow themselves to be robbed by the Greeks and the Jews who come to buy the results of their very dangerous labours.

I found the work of pearl-fishing just one long round of monotony.

Our two divers would go off with the pirogue with the dawn, and would spend the entire day diving. In the evening, they would return, and mine was the distasteful task of opening oyster after oyster.

I did not relish the job. It is perhaps not generally known, but a Moslem will not eat shell fish of any description, and while there is no injunction against actually touching such things, a Moslem does so with a certain repugnance.

Abdul sat beside me during these operations. He would seize the oysters as I tossed them down, and squeeze the soft, oozy flesh between his fingers. Sometimes, but not very often, a grunt heralded the presence of the calcareous rotundity which is a pearl, but our Danakhil was never impressed. One or two of the round pearls were set aside, but the majority, according to our Danakhil expert, were suitable only for crushing into the pearl dust called *kohl* which so many Orientals use for darkening the eyelids.

We shifted our fishing ground from time to time;

but nothing spectacular was brought up. Luck seemed to have deserted Abdul for a time, and he began to fidget.

This was not surprising, for a man accustomed all his life to the deserts, and to hard marching, the cramped spaces of the boutre must have been insufferable.

Umid, too, began to gaze at the bobbing waves with an expression of loathing, and I knew that we should not be long pearl-fishing. My only hope was that our next venture would not be gun-running. Abdul was game for anything—I knew that—but his face had twice been studied by the British fleet, and my experience is that you can pull an Englishman's leg for some of the time, but not persistently. He is apt to get you in the end, and just when you are congratulating yourself that you have just pulled across another one.

It might have turned out to be gun-running in the end if Fate had not decided to take a hand. I suppose it was thought that Abdul had had an especially long run for his money, and that the time had come to square accounts.

It was easy to see that Abdul was rapidly becoming disgusted with the poor results attending the efforts of his divers. They, poor devils, spent half their lives beneath the sea, and in constant danger from the sharks which abound in the Red Sea, but all they got out of it was not a very large handful of meal twice a day. They were poor things, entirely devoid of spirit, and entirely overawed by the massiveness of Abdul.

In the presence of Umid, they crouched away into the darkest recesses of the boat. Abdul's sons they hated, and feared, for the young rascals were invariably thinking up a new practical joke to play on them.

I gave our pearl-fishing about another fortnight, but it was in ten days that Abdul threw in his hand, and declared his intention of disposing of the pearls which had accrued.

A fierce argument ensued between Abdul and the Danakhil as to where the sale could best be negotiated.

The Danakhil declared that there were good dealers to be found in Assab, but Abdul would have none of them. He roundly told the seaman that he had put dust in his eyes when he had described the fortune to be made from pearl-diving, and that he suspected his motives.

In the end, Abdul insisted upon making for Massawa.

Here difficulty was experienced in locating a dealer, but eventually an Armenian was tracked down who was said to deal in pearls, and arrangements were made to visit him ashore.

For some reason Abdul believed that I knew something of the value of pearls, and he declared that I would have to be a party to the transaction. I did not demur, for it was useless talking to the man once he had made up his mind. I prayed, however, that the weather would not prove to be too stormy if Abdul should be "done."

This may seem a remote and laughable con-



A WAYSIDE DOPI-SMOKE-STILLER IN SINAI

tingency with one such as Abdul, but I had met Armenians before.

Our man was a particularly mean specimen, and the possessor of a permanent sniff which was embarrassing and aggravating.

He regaled us with tea, and we talked of anything except pearls. It was as if these things never existed. The Armenian never took his dark eyes off the folds of Abdul's robe, nevertheless. He knew the pearls were secreted there, and behind all his irritating persiflage he was eager for business.

I was beginning to hate the sight of tea when the first advance was made in the direction of trading.

"I hear you have been to the Gulf ports, and have put in at Jhibhuti and Assab?"

The Armenian put the question to us generally, but the Danakhil and I allowed Abdul's non-committal grunt to suffice as answer.

"Perchance you bring silks, or watches?"

Abdul smiled.

The Armenian laughed.

"Perhaps . . . guns?"

He whispered the last word, as if it were one of great portent.

He pretended to be grievously disappointed when Abdul growled a denial, and shook his head sadly.

"Guns," he murmured softly. "We could have done business with guns." He twined his talons one in the other, and assumed a bored expression. With guns off the horizon he appeared to think that nothing else mattered. Only courtesy prevented him from bringing the interview to an immediate end.

"What did you bring?"

It was out. The old rascal had nerved himself to the point, and the effort was almost too much for him. He yawned grotesquely. Perhaps his mind was still on guns.

"Pearls!"

Abdul shot out the word like the enthusiastic carrier of good-tidings, but if the Armenian was thrilled he took good care not to show it.

"Pearls?"

His sniff was a little more blatant; a trifle more aggressive; certainly more supercilious.

For answer Abdul thrust his hand inside his robe, and brought out the large silk handkerchief which contained the results of our weeks of diving.

The Armenian shifted in his chair, and he was plainly ill at ease.

"I am afraid," he muttered diffidently, "that I do not deal in pearls."

The old liar said this with such exquisite insouciance that it was almost impossible not to believe him.

With Abdul, however, he had a worthy antagonist.

"I am sorry," he returned gravely, and the silk handkerchief disappeared between the folds of his robe.

He rose, as if to end a profitless interview.

"I regret that we should have occupied so much of your time, but we had been informed that you dealt in pearls."

He made to depart, the Danakhil and I at his heels.

None of us hurried, because we were all aware that the time for going was not yet.

"Perhaps I may be allowed to look!"

The Armenian was coming round. This further plea had cost him an additional effort, and had taken great toll of his nervous resources. Little globules of perspiration adorned his forehead. He did not like the way the matter was going. He was more accustomed to semi-imbecile divers prepared to part with their wares for a fractional part of their value.

Abdul turned, and faced the man.

"But, if you do not deal——"

"Will you not allow me to look. I am interested in pearls, even if I have not the money with which to buy. Won't you accord a poor man this privilege?" The man's tone was wheedling.

None too pleased, Abdul opened his handkerchief, and displayed his pearls.

The mantle of rising expectation fell from the Armenian, and he could not have been more blasé.

He gazed at the jewels, and looked up at Abdul, and smiled commiseratingly.

"You have more, my friend?"

Abdul shook his head.

"You have been unfortunate!"

He made to draw the four corners of the handkerchief together as if to cloak an offensive sight.

Never have I seen a man so long over a comparatively simple operation. His deliberation and hesitation were an exhibition of a consummate art. His acting was superb.

"You despise my pearls?" Abdul was beginning to get angry, and rattled.

"Despise!" The dealer sounded pained. "I am sorry for you, my friend. I do not despise another's efforts—I am only grieved that they have not been better rewarded." Still his fingers were engaged in the unending task of folding a handkerchief.

"But, they are good pearls, and worth money!"

Abdul had mentioned the magical word.

"Money! . . . How much?" The Armenian spoke in a hoarse whisper. His agitation was such that he momentarily forgot to sniff.

"Ten thousand rupees," declared Abdul at a venture.

The dealer raised his hands to his brow as if to ward off a blow. He screwed up his eyes, and swayed gently to and fro.

"You mean five hundred, friend!"

"Ten thousand." Abdul was obdurate.

The light of battle leaped to the dealer's eyes.

"Five hundred," he said firmly. "That is too much for these miserable things. All the men who call here show me the scrapings of shells, and pretend that they have brought me jewels fit for a diadem."

"Ten thousand."

Abdul was implacable.

There was a difference of nine thousand five hundred rupees between the two, and I had visions of being in the place for a week while the two principals to the bargain became weaker and weaker.

An hour passed in heated wrangling, and they

were only a hundred rupees nearer their goal. The task of finding an accord seemed to be insuperable.

The Armenian was wearing well, and was showing few signs of stress, but Abdul had lost his temper more than once, and was looking a trifle frayed.

The dealer decided upon a diversion.

He broke off the discussion, and retired to an inner fastness. When he returned he had another silk handkerchief in his hands, and this he opened before us with a great parade of ceremony.

"See," he whispered gloatingly, "these are pearls. Compare them with those you offer, and you will see why I am diffident. For these lovelies—for these beauties—I gave but eight hundred rupees."

The old skinflint may have been speaking the truth, but the stones were worth an incredible amount. He had in that not too clean square of silk some of the finest pearls I have ever seen, and that goes for something, for the regalia in many of the Indian States is priceless.

I saw Abdul's eyes gleam, and I began to feel uneasy.

Selling pearls was one thing. To have them thrust under one's nose was another.

He extended a hand to finger one of the stones, but the dealer drew the silk artfully away. He trusted, but not that much.

"What do you say now, my friend . . . five hundred and fifty rupees?"

Abdul growled. The sight of these other pearls had gone to his head, and had made him dissatisfied with the results of his own venture. He turned upon

the Danakhil, and scowled at him. The gesture was eloquent. It said: "Why haven't I pearls like these? You are No Good."

He swung back upon the dealer.

"I am not selling," he snapped, "but I will buy!"

Never have I seen a change come so suddenly over a man. The Armenian lost his blasé air, and became the suppliant.

He rose, and fussed round Abdul, rubbing his hands and making little clucking noises.

"You mean my wondrous pearls?"

"Yes." Abdul was beginning to fidget.

"But—I would not part with them—the beauties. . . ."

"You refuse to sell?" Abdul was curt.

"We-ll. . . . Perhaps—at a price."

"You gave eight hundred rupees!"

The dealer paled, and made signs of distress. He turned his face toward Abdul, and sweated.

"That . . . that was my little joke, my friend." He laughed nervously. "Here—here, I have the best of a collection of years. I have hesitated to part with them. . . . I have been waiting for a man of wealth and with an eye to beauty who would pay me their worth. . . ."

"How much?" Abdul barked out the words.

"Not one less than one hundred and twenty thousand rupees!"

I gasped, but Abdul did not turn a hair.

"We will bargain, you and I," he said in a businesslike tone. "In the meantime, I will

assure you that I have the means with which to pay."

"You," he said, turning to the Danakhil, "return to the boat, and tell Umid, my wife, to unlock my locker and take from there three bags."

"You," and he turned to me, "you go with the Danakhil, and see that no hurt befalls him. Escort him here with the money."

I looked at Abdul amazed, for I well knew that there was no locker and that Abdul's money was secreted in a place not known even to Umid.

He glared at me, and gave an imperious beat with his foot.

"Go!" he roared, and I went, the Danakhil running at my heels.

We had been on the boutre barely twenty minutes when I espied a small boat being propelled toward us in frantic haste.

In it was Abdul, and he pointed frenziedly at our mast and our furled sail.

It was some moments before I understood him, and then my heart sank. There had been more dirty work, and the sooner that sail went up the better.

We were all ready for Abdul when he clambered aboard, and we were immediately under weigh. There was a revealing red stain on his robe which I knew was not betel nut. It was blood, all right, and I was rather sorry for the Armenian.

We did not hug the coast, but made straight for the Arabian shore. We were not followed, or at least we sighted no pursuing sails, and again I

marvelled at Abdul's amazing effrontery and extraordinary luck.

He had gone to sell a few miserable pearls, and had walked away with a fortune. How long, I wondered, could this sort of thing go on.

The answer came three days later, when we were hugging the shore searching for a convenient place to land in order that we might replenish our fast-dwindling water supply.

Abdul had made no mention of what had happened after the Danakhil and I had left on our errand, but he knew that I knew, and I speculated on his reactions. Would, for instance, he decide that I knew too much? There was so much that he could do if he took an active dislike to me.

But we wanted water, and Abdul was gazing hard at what he believed was a likely spot. There were one or two miserable huts huddled together not far from the shore, and that betokened the presence of what we wanted.

In the flurry and excitement of getting away from Massawa we had jettisoned our boat, and now we had to stand well in in order that men might wade ashore from the boutre.

The Danakhil dropped anchor, and he went overboard, standing up in the water up to his neck.

Abdul's eldest son, a valiant and high-spirited youngster, tired of his cramped quarters on the boutre, followed him with the intention of stretching his legs ashore.

The water was too deep for his inches, and a wave sent him spluttering. The tide commenced

to suck him away, and the Danakhil, floundering shoreward, failed to notice the child's distress.

Umid sent up a shriek, and Abdul cursed impotently, for he could not swim. Quickly sensing that something had to be done, and that quickly, I slipped overboard in my turn, and threshed toward the boy. I say "threshed" advisedly, for my purpose was to splash rather than swim with elegance. I have the greatest respect for sharks.

I seized the boy, who struggled madly, and made my way back to the boat with difficulty. I saw that it would be necessary for me to make for the off-shore side of the boutre, where the water was deepest, and I did so.

The boy was unconscious when eventually I gripped the side of the boat, and I was almost exhausted. I had not sufficient strength to hoist my burden inboard.

Abdul came agitatedly to the side to assist me. He leaned over to get a grip, and I saw a flash of colour at his breast. The folds of his robe gaped, and silk protruded. It was the handkerchief which I had last seen in the hands of the Armenian.

Before my horrified eyes the fold gaped and gaped, and a small bundle slipped from the robe, and into the sea.

Too late, Abdul saw the movement, and made an ineffectual grab.

Torn between his son and the pearls, he was in a great state, but his son won. Together we got the young man on board, where he was handed over to the ministrations of a tearful Umid.

When I had recovered my breath, I offered to go down for the pearls, but Abdul would have none of it.

I suggested the Danakhil, now shouting from the shore, wondering why none of us had followed him.

Abdul spat.

Against my advice, for he could not swim, as I have said, he divested himself of his robe, and tying a rope round his waist, went overboard like a porpoise.

He had made several futile efforts to get to the bottom, and was getting angrier and angrier, when I saw the fin.

I shouted and gesticulated, but what with his rage and the water in his ears, Abdul heard and saw nothing. Down he went again.

I made a blind rush for the rope which was tethered to the mast, and began hauling with frantic haste. Abdul came to the surface, and raised his hands. The handkerchief was there, safely retrieved.

Again I shouted, and for the first time Abdul became aware of his danger.

I bent my every effort to the rope, and hauled hand over hand. My head was down, and I did not see what happened, but a terrible scream, long drawn out, told me all that I wanted to know.

I hauled and hauled, my arms nearly dropping from their sockets, and a bloody mess plopped over the side. It was Abdul, or, rather what remained of him, and he was still conscious. A remnant of the silk handkerchief was still clutched in his twitching fingers, but the jewels had gone.

So had a leg, from the thigh, and Abdul was pumping out his life's blood. .

I rushed toward him, but it was all too evident that he was beyond any small aid which I could afford him.

I laid him down on the deck, and he smiled wanly.

"The pearls—the pearls," he said brokenly, "they've gone."

He lay there gasping, and his face began to go grey.

"Take care of Umid and my sons," he gasped. "There is money at the bottom of the big water chattie. The pearls—my pearls—sell them. Take what you want to get to Bokhara, and give Umid the rest."

There were painful pauses between each word, and I could see that he was going.

He looked up at me, and I nodded. In that moment I am sure that he knew that I would not betray him.

He was trying to say something, but the effort was too much for him.

I bent down, and placed my lips near his ear.

"My papers!"

He smiled, and I bent my head with my ear to his lips.

"Din Chand," he muttered. "Din Chand—ask Din Cha——" and he was gone.

Suffice it to say that I kept my word.

Browbeating a recalcitrant Danakhil we sailed the boutre to Aden.

In the water chattie I found an airtight, oilskin bag with the money mentioned by Abdul. To this I added the pearls, and the money I eventually literally knocked out of the Danakhil in return for the boutre.

From Aden we shipped to Bushir, and from Bushir we found a small steamer to take us to Karachi. There I sold the pearls, and retaining only sufficient to see me to Bokhara in comfort, I left Umid, and went to seek out Din Chand.

I found him, and secured my papers.

My rugs and carpets have been upon a continental market for a long time now.

